

where demons hide by pencilledhearts

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Summary:

When all is said and done, Steve is left sitting at the edge of his pool, alone.

Or, Nancy leaves with Barb and Steve gets dragged into the Upside Down. It changes everything and nothing.

1. broken parable

When all is said and done, Steve is left sitting at the edge of his pool, alone.

A rowdy gathering celebrating freedom from his parents has turned into a pity party for one in the space of five minutes and he's not quite sure how he ended up here.

Tommy and Carol have disappeared up to his parent's bedroom with all the respect that they usually afford him. If he listens, he can hear their moans drifting through the open window. Nancy and Barb have left; Nancy gave him a regretful look as she left, which is a small amount of consolation. He'd had plans for tonight, though, so it's not much.

If Barb hadn't cut herself...

He kicks at the water idly, watching the ripples as they spread until they gently lap at the stone edge.

Barb wasn't even supposed to be here. Why had Nancy brought her along? He thought they'd been going pretty steady, pretty good but she'd felt the need to bring along her best friend to a private party in his house while his parents weren't home. Which means, what, exactly?

She was deliberately cock blocking them?

If she were any other girl, Steve might have broken it off then and there. He's done all the song and dance before. Knows when to cut loose when things get too heavy or aren't going at all.

Nancy's different, though. He doesn't know why; he's dated other smart girls before, dated hotter girls too. But she's captivating. There's a shine in her eyes, a confidence in her step and shyness that-fuck if he knows, he just knows he likes it.

What she sees in him, however, he doesn't know. Nancy Wheeler is no fool but something has made her decide to stick around anyway.

Well, until now, maybe.

“Fucking Nancy Wheeler,” he mutters to himself.

With a sigh, Steve decides that self pity isn’t a good look at him. He kicks the water one last time and then picks himself up. There are cans strewn about still, so he collects them and chucks them into a crate by the back door. Then he gets a cloth to clean up the mess that Barb made.

There’s not that much, but he scrubs at the blood anyway, bitterly hoping that it stung. He starts on the knife that cause the whole thing to begin with next, polishing the blade and carefully not looking at the engraved letters on the handle.

It’s as he’s drying it off, the chill beginning to set in as his wet clothes stop him from warming up, that he hears something.

A rustle in the trees; quiet enough to maybe be nothing but loud enough to catch his attention.

He looks into the tree line that marks the edge of the property; a few branches wave in the wind but no other movement catches his eye. He laughs to himself.

“C’mon Harrington, pull it together.”

He turns his back, pockets the knife and pulls out a cigarette. Cups his hand around it to make sure it lights and sucks in a deep breath. Starts to make his way back into the house and-

-fuck-

-something grabs his ankle and *yanks*. He opens his mouth to yell. Feels the scrape of stone on his chest as he topples, is dragged backwards along the deck. He scrabbles desperately with his fingers but there’s nothing there as he’s pulled into the pool. Tries to call out again but breathes in water instead of air.

Water surrounds him, in his eyes, mouth, throat. He thrashes, tries to kick his leg away but whatever has got a hold on him just grips harder. Down, down down. He twists, tries to get a look at his

assailant, tries to throw a punch but the water drags and makes him slow.

Everything is murky and dark. Whoever is holding him is just a distant outline with slightly distorted features.

He can't breathe, he can't breathe, he can't breathe-

He remembers the knife in his pocket and he stretches, pulls it out, stabs blindly

He needs to get to the surface, needs some fresh air. If he can just get his head above water, he can shout for Tommy. As long as he can last long enough for Tommy to get downstairs, he's going to be fine.

The knife meets resistant and a moment later, the grip on his ankle loosens and the water gets cloudier. He kicks once, twice, three times and then he's free.

The water breaks around him as he finally reaches the surface and breath, never so glad for air, reaches for the side to haul himself out as he coughs and splutters, gagging on the rancid water in his mouth as-

-as he realises that something is wrong.

It's snowing.

There's white stuff falling from the sky, almost like ash, floating by and down.

And his deck, which moments ago had been clean and tidy is covered in filth and vines as if he's been asleep for years and nature has reclaimed his house.

Steve notices all of this in a few second as he gags and retches again, beer and water and something black splashing onto the ground. Something splashes behind him and scrambles to his feet.

"Tommy!" he yells. "Carol, Tommy, help! Help!"

He looks to the pool, sees something large stir under the surface and

watches the water swirl violently.

“Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit! Tommy!”

There’s no response. Steve looks to his parent’s bedroom but the light isn’t on. He can’t hear them either. Something in his stomach turns. Briefly, he considers running into the house, to try and find them, to warn them, get help, anything.

Something crashes into his back instead and he stumbles forward. He twists the knife behind him again, feels it jar his arm as it connects with something *hard* and then he’s running.

Fuck. His ankle is screaming at him, the grip that the *thing* had had on it having put some kind of pressure on the joint.

He doesn’t know what’s happened. A minute ago, he’d been about to take a beer to bed with him while he smoked a joint. He can’t even begin to understand who or what is chasing him, why everything looks so different, how this has happened or why him.

There’s a weird light in the sky, an orange tinge that lights up the world around him and hides the stars.

Something howls behind him.

He runs faster.

...

Wednesday morning dawns like any other; Nancy eats an silent and awkward breakfast with her family, gets annoyed at Mike’s weird teenage ways and arrives at school with twenty minutes to spare, waiting by her locker until Barb arrives.

“How’s your hand?” is the first thing she asks when she does.

Barb shakes her head with a smile, as if she think Nancy’s concern is

silly, but she holds up her hand anyway. There's a small bandage around it, slightly red from where the injury initially bled through, but otherwise looks fine.

"Hello to you, too," she says.

Nancy grimaces. "I'm so sorry," she says. "You told you didn't want to go but I made you and look what-"

"Nance, it's not your fault." Barb shakes her head again. "I just should have been more careful. Besides, I don't even know why I tried to do it. You know I don't like that kind of stuff."

"Still. You wouldn't have been there if it wasn't for me."

Barb leans against her locker, stopping Nancy from getting her books. "It's just a cut," she says, arching her eyebrow.

Nancy flushes.

"Are *you* okay?" Barb asks. "Was loverboy upset?"

"He didn't pick up this morning," Nancy says. "And he did look a little upset when we left last night."

"Yeah, well, I'm pretty sure he had plans."

Barb waggles her eyebrows, all insinuation and only a little judgment. Nancy knows that her friend doesn't really understand why she said yes when Steve asked her out. He's a player and a jock, and a bit of a dick. But he can also be sweet and funny and kind. And anyway, she's a freshman; she deserves a little fun.

"Barb! Just because-"

"Nance, please."

Nancy silences because they both know how that argument goes. A bell rings, and silently, Barb opens her own locker and starts rummaging inside, allowing Nancy to open her own - finally.

"It's doesn't matter anyway," Nancy says. "You come first. Always."

Barb quirks a half smile and looks at her feet for a second. "Thanks," she says, grasping Nancy's hand and squeezing.

And that's that.

Or at least, it should be, but then there's no note in her locker after first period, or second. Steve isn't in maths - the only class they share - and when lunch comes around, Nancy spends around half an hour looking for him before giving up.

It's stupid how quickly she's come to expect these small gestures. And how much it hurts that they've stopped, so suddenly.

It's stupid.

He's probably ditched school for the day. A hangover, maybe, if he got crazy with Tommy and Carol after they left. Or maybe he's actually mad at her.

She feels a clench in her gut and frowns a little throughout lunch as she and Barb eat their sandwiches on the bleachers. Steve isn't exactly the most studious guy in their year, but it's a Wednesday of all days. Can he really afford to miss class in his sophomore year? And, as she watches some the track kids practice on the field, she wonders if he can really afford to miss basketball practice when he's trying for a scholarship?

She goes about the rest of her day trying not to think about it because she's not going to be one of those girls who obsesses over her boyfriend's whereabouts. It stays in the back of her mind anyway. Something feels wrong – though she doesn't know why or how.

It's probably just because she's unsettled. Mike's been distraught for the last few days and Jonathon Byers has been posting missing posters in every hallway and classroom.

She's just being paranoid.

...

Steve stands in Hawkin's town square, in the middle of the green and spins in a circle as his chest heaves, trying to regain his breath.

There's nothing behind him. He can't hear anything, at least, and it's so silent here that he thinks he'd be able to hear something approaching from several streets over. Although, everything is also kind of muted - like he's still underwater.

"Hello?" he calls.

No one replies.

It's eerie. This is Hawkins; there's always some people meandering on by the shops, kids skiving school and people walking their dogs. It's never this empty.

The vines are everywhere, even here. Thick, ropey and oozing, they sprawl along the ground like weeds that have grown out of control. They climb up the sides of buildings and into every nook and cranny. Twice now, he's felt something nudging at the edge of his foot and see another one as if it's about to try and entwine him, too.

There's still that weird stuff in the air, as well. It's not snow, he's realised, and it's not ash either. Steve has tried to touch it but it's more like dust; visible in the light but almost intangible.

Whatever it is, he hopes it's not poisonous because he's swallowed a fuck ton of it.

"Hello?" he calls again and waits for the echo that never comes.

It's like he's in some weird fucked up parody of Hawkins. The buildings surrounding him are all identical to the ones he knows, just more run down and broken. When he tries to touch them, the bricks feel solid underneath his skin.

Did Tommy slip him something during the party?

Maybe this is just a really bad trip. He's in normal, safe Hawkins and he's just hallucinating this monstrous twisted veneer. Besides, what's

the alternative? That he's, what, travelled to a different place? That's been made to look like Hawkins?

There are too many details, too many things feel too real. The air tastes like ash in his mouth, his ankle is on fire. He thinks that it's sprained, or that he's torn a ligament, that whatever the thing that dragged him into the pool was has actually really injured him and that the running only made it worse.

All to try and find help only to be met by block after block of abandoned buildings and rotten nature.

Whatever has happened to him, it isn't natural and it isn't right and he just wants to find a way home. He wants a hug from Nancy, to feel her hold him close. Wants to share a laugh with Tommy and Carol or to kick back on the sofa with a re-run of Seinfeld. He'd really like to just wake up in bed and realise this was all a bad dream.

"Fuck," he says.

The sound of his own voice makes him feel a bit calmer. Everything here sounds strange, echoing and distorted, but he can feel the vibration in his throat and it makes him feel more in control.

"Fuck," he says again. "Come on, Harrington. You can do this."

He looks around again, sees the general store and decides that it's his first target. The door is locked, so he takes off his jumper, wraps it around his hand and punches through the glass. It shatters after two hits, tiny pieces flying through the air, and he scrapes the rest away so he can climb through.

"Think, Harrington," he says, pacing down the first aisle. He tries to imagine that's he with the basketball team, the last session before a big game. Thinks of Tommy asking what their plan of action is going to be.

"You need a weapon. There's something chasing you and you need something bigger than a toothpick."

Good, that's good. He can do this.

“And then supplies. Food. Water.”

He remembers his ankle.

“First aid kit.”

It's enough to be going on with. Really, he wants a gun but when he looks through the aisles, the shelves are mostly empty with thick vines wrapped tightly around. He tries to get some tinned fruit out of a narrow gap but it's almost like the vines are alive. They grip tighter and his hand almost gets stuck.

He swears, shaking his hand and moves on.

In the end, all he manages to find is a couple of rusted cans of soup, a jumper that tears as he pulls it free and a metal pipe about the length of his forearm. It's not much but it's something. He takes a moment to tie the fabric into a makeshift bag. It's crude, the soup will fall out if he goes any faster than a walk, but workable. Thank fuck for compulsory first aid lessons at school. Learning how to tie a sling has suddenly become a more essential skill than he thought.

The metal pipe feels good in his hand. It has a weight to it. When he swings it, it makes a whistling sound through the air. If his assailant comes back, they're in for a surprise.

Fuck. Shit. Fuck.

Steve closes his eyes for a moment, tries to get a handle on his panic. Tries to take deep breaths. Imagines the team again, imagines that the panic is pre-match nerves, that he's got his friends counting on him to pull them through.

His stomach settles ever so slightly and he holds up the pipe in front of him threateningly. He's got all he can from here; he needs to find somewhere he can defend, somewhere he can feel safe. Somewhere he can hide from whatever or whoever the fuck tried to drown him in his own pool.

“Fuck me,” he says for good measure and steps back out onto the street.

2. hold steady

Summary for the Chapter:

It's like he's eight again, in Carol's backyard on Halloween as she tells a scary story, silent in exactly the right places and loud in all the wrong ones, setting the mood perfectly. He's waiting for the scare, knowing it's coming but not knowing when.

Or: Steve starts to try and figure out what's happened to him, Nancy just wants to talk to Steve and Hopper would quite like bad things to stop happening now, please.

Hopper groans and puts his head in his hands. It's 9:30 in the morning on a Tuesday and he's already got a headache and a craving for some beer. He's tired from the relentless searches of the last few days, the countless calls he's put in and the constant check ins from Joyce, terrified for her missing son.

Will has been missing for going on four days now. Each day without something new drags the odds of bringing him back alive lower and lower - and they haven't found anything since the bike two days ago now.

The thing is, Hopper knew Will when he was a baby. He was born back in March '71, just a month after... well, Joyce had taken him to all local new mums and toddler groups and the first time Hopper had seen Joyce there, he'd felt a rush of emotions that made him feel like he was fifteen again. He hadn't particularly enjoyed being fifteen, so it hadn't been a wholly positive experience, but still. Seeing her baby boy, the son of Lonnie Byers - who even then, he'd had a distaste for - had made him feel something else.

Flo raps on the door and pauses before entering, taking in his sorry state. She sets a fresh cup of coffee down on the table.

"Any luck?" she asks.

Hopper sighs. "The kid's vanished without a trace. Tell Callahan and Powell that they'd better have finished bitching and be ready to go by ten."

"You'd be better asking for a blue moon," she says with a fond shake of her head. "If you fancy banging your head against a different wall, Fred Nielson called again. Something about the Harrington boy - says he's growing weed on the lawn."

She sets down a report form next to the coffee, filled out in her neat print. Hopper glares at it and wishes that it would set itself alight.

"Fred needs to find something better to do with his life than invent problems to get his neighbours in trouble," he grumbles. Two weeks ago, he'd been complaining about the rubbish tip on the Preston's lawn. Before that, it had been an 'out of control rabid dog' that was actually was actually Doris Lieberman's lost poodle.

"Manners," Flo reminds him before tottering away to harass the others.

Hopper lights a cigarette, looks at the Byers file pensively. The boy's face smiles up at him and he closes his eyes for a moment so that he doesn't have to look. Then he slides the complaint form over the top to cover it, picks up the phone and dials Nielson's number.

Fred answers on the third ring and recognises his voice straight away. "Chief Hopper! I was wondering when you'd call," he starts boisterously with far too much self-confidence and at the beginning of what is clearly going to be a long rant. Hopper opens his mouth to stop the tirade, a few short, sharp words already in mind, when Flo appears back at his door.

She doesn't knock this time, just stands there. There's another slip of paper in her hand. She's pale and shaking.

Hopper lowers the receiver to his shoulder, muffling the microphone.

"Flo?" he asks.

She steps forwards and holds the note out to him. "We had a call."

Slowly, he takes it. His cigarette flares as he sucks in his breath, then slowly dies. He barely notices as he takes in Flo's neat writing. *Benny's diner — body — approximately 10:40 — Earl.*

"Benny?" he asks. "Our Benny?"

Flo nods shakily. She's a regular, he remembers. She lives out that way and has known Benny since he was in junior school.

He closes his eyes. If the disappearance of Will Byers feels like a chance for him to bring the peace that he never had for his own child, this feels like his punishment.

"Deal with this," he says gruffly and thrusts the phone towards her. Fred's voice is still coming out the tinny speaker, oblivious to the fact that no one is listening.

"Jim-"

"If Joyce calls, tell her that she'll be the first to know if there's an update and to let us do our jobs. Tell Fred to *fuck off*."

He's being harsh. He knows that. He doesn't care.

A ten year old boy is missing and one of his friends is dead.

Steve Harrington and the possible weed on his lawn is the least of his worries.

...

"Well, well, well. If it isn't prissy Miss Wheeler."

Carol looks as haughty as ever, holding court with Tommy in the abandoned hallways of Hawkins High and Nancy regrets her decision to approach them almost as soon as she's made it. She feels rather than sees Barb bristle beside her.

"Is she always like this?" Barb asks quietly.

Nancy grimaces which is answer enough.

"Thank you, Princess Wheeler, for gracing us with your presence!" Tommy bows mockingly and sweeps his arm out. "What for can I do for you? Are you here to reclaim your squire's dignity?"

Nancy narrows her eyes. She can't quite believe that he's real - that this is really who he is, that it might not be a performance that he plays every day, Carol beside him. It's like the both of them are cardboard cut outs of themselves: one dimensional and weak. Still, she doesn't think it's meant to be cruel. Not friendly either... just, words with no intent. If she wants to continue dating Steve, she's going to have to get used to them.

And actually, that's kind of why she's here.

"Look, I just want to know if you've seen Steve," she says. The school bell rings and around them, classroom doors start to fly open as people rush to their next class, the sound of chattering voices filling the hall.

"What's it to you?" Carol asks, a sneer on her lips. Tommy shoves her good naturedly.

"I *am* dating him," Nancy snaps and ignores Barb's warning look that says, 'that isn't going to help'. "I just want to talk to him," she tries again. "About the other night. But I think he's avoiding me; I haven't seen him since the party."

Tommy nods sagely. "Boyfriend problems, I get it." He leans in closer. "Was the sex not good?"

Nancy gapes.

Carol rolls her eyes. "We don't judge, you know. You don't have to be a virgin until you marry. We don't care that he went home with you."

"No that's not what I-" Nancy takes a deep breath. "Steve didn't come home with me. After Barb cut herself, we went home - without him."

“Not at first, sure,” Tommy says. “But then he appears at your window an hour later, a rose in between his teeth. Tries to apologise, makes a few moves, one thing turns into another...”

“We know his MO,” Carol adds. “You’re not his first.”

“Cut it out,” Barb says scornfully. “Have you seen him?”

Tommy frowns. He seems serious for the first time. “No,” he admits. “He missed practice yesterday. I figured he’d spent the night with you, didn’t get much sleep.”

“Maybe he’s got a side hoe. Wouldn’t be the first time,” Carol says, looking Nancy dead in the eye. “Probably not the last.”

She snaps her bubble gum pointedly and Nancy feels a wave of disgust.

“You’re vile.”

She turns on her heel and walks off, feels Barb do the same.

“Fuck them,” Barb says.

“How can they be so horrible all of the time? Doesn’t it get exhausting?”

Barb shrugs. “They could be worse.”

Nancy stops abruptly and folds her arms. She knows that Barb has been bullied since grade school and that she’s more used to hurtful comments, but she can’t help but take it badly. “Do you think they’re right?” she asks. She tries not to let her voice wobble because she doesn’t want Barb to know how much she cares. Steve is supposed to be something fun, not something serious, but even so. She likes him. And if he really is sleeping with someone else...

“Oh, Nance.” Barb pulls her in for a hug, holding tight for a moment before grasping her by the shoulders. “It’s probably nothing. Maybe he just decided to go for a walk. And then ditch school.”

“But it might be something,” Nancy says quietly.

“You know his reputation,” Barb says. Her voice is soft, her face sad but understanding. “He’s dated half of the girls in our year.”

Nancy swallows. Looks down at her feet. The skirt she’s wearing, her favourite lilac one, suddenly feels like a thinly veiled attempt to attract the attention of someone who doesn’t care.

But still. She remembers the way he looked at her the other night after he’d snuck into her room like he was Romeo and she was Juliet, the way he’d looked up at her with serious eyes. “You’re beautiful, Nancy Wheeler,” he’d said, and it felt genuine.

“Okay,” she says finally, feeling the weight of Barb’s knowing gaze. “Do you mind doing me a favour? Can you drive me over to his tonight? If he tries to avoid me, then I’ll end it. But I need to know.”

“Are you sure, Nance?”

She nods. Tucks a stray piece of hair behind her ear. “I need to know.”

...

Steve ends up holing up in the men’s changing rooms at Hawkins High. It’s not the safest, probably, but he knows this school like the back of his hand, knows all the places to hide. There’s the abandoned changing rooms near the dining hall where the roof is beginning to cave in, where he kissed Hannah Litz for the first time. The storage cupboard near the science classroom that the maintenance guy has forgotten existed where he fooled around with Cindy. The spot under the bleachers on the north side where it looks like it’s impossible to get to, but Tommy found a way by wriggling through a gap made by a poorly secured metal panel.

None of those places are particularly good for running from if he gets caught or defending while he’s there. So, the men’s changing rooms it is. At least they don’t smell as bad here as they should.

The vines, whatever they are, aren't as thick this far into the building. It's almost like they need sunlight to survive but there isn't any sunlight here even outside. He's still wary about them, not forgetting the way they seemed to move earlier, as if they knew he was there.

That's ridiculous. He's being ridiculous. Knowing that doesn't stop him from being paranoid though, looking over his shoulder every so often and jumping at the smallest of sounds, certain that something is creeping up behind him.

Everything feels wrong. It's like he's eight again, in Carol's backyard on Halloween as she tells a scary story, silent in exactly the right places and loud in all the wrong ones, setting the mood perfectly. He's waiting for the scare, knowing it's coming but not knowing when.

He hides his stolen stash in one the shower cubicles, quietly proud of what he's collected. He's thinking ahead; he's being smart. He's got this.

Something screeches, far off in the distance.

Steve stiffens, tightening his grip on the metal pipe that he's still clutching. He's sat on one of the benches next to the showers, back pressed against the tiles and right leg propped up. His ankle has been swelling for the last couple of hours so he's trying to rest it. Gets the feeling that at any moment, he needs to be ready to run.

He's been trying to understand what's happened. What this place is, how he got here.

It's not a bad trip. It's not a nightmare. He's not in a coma, waiting to wake up. This fucked up twisted reality is somehow happening and he needs to figure out how he got here, and how he can get back. If he can get back.

It's the kind of shit that his old science teacher would have loved. Steve hasn't thought about Mr Clarke in a few years now, but he imagines the guy's face at seeing whatever it is that Steve is seeing right now. He was always going on about making new discoveries,

how fascinating the world was, wasn't science *neat*. There's probably some theory that some nerd has created about this exact situation, and Mr Clarke would know exactly what to do.

Fuck.

Steve groans. He's not paid attention in science for years. Thinking about Scott Clark and his amazing theories isn't going to help. It's about as useless as thinking about how the ghostbusters would deal with this situation.

Wherever he is, he was dragged here by someone or *something*. He knows that at the very least. Whatever it was that took him managed to be in his backyard one and then here the next, dragging Steve as its unwilling victim.

What would Nancy do? She'd probably already have a working theory; maybe she had an answer on one of her flashcards.

"You're an idiot, Steve Harrington," she'd said with that cute, shy smile of hers and he thinks about how she'd tell him what he'd already done wrong.

'I want to go home, Ste-eve,' she'd say. 'Why'd you bring us further away from however we got here? Are you trying to get us stuck?'

Steve runs a hand through his hair, idly aware that it's dirty and greasy, sticking up in places it shouldn't.

Maybe he should go back to the house. Maybe there's some kind of clue as to how he ended up here. He'd been a bit preoccupied at the time — he shivers, feels his heart start beating faster in his chest as he remembers the fear, the grip on his ankle, his knife sinking into something soft — but maybe there's a kind of doorway?

He laughs, a short bark that echoes in the small space. Is he expecting some kind of magic portal? Maybe he is on drugs.

Still, it's worth a try at the very least. It can't hurt to go back and look around... Even if there's nothing to see, he remembers suddenly, his dad has a shotgun somewhere in the house. If he can find it — if it even exists in this place — well, he'll feel a lot safer.

Something screeches again. The sound is echoed three times, from the different directions. Three different animals.

Steve lets out a shaky breath and tries to loosen his shoulders. They sound far away, wherever they are. Whatever they are. He doesn't have to leave right now, he can wait. These things have to sleep at some point. He'll make his move then.

Besides, they might just be bats.

Loud, scary sounding, monster-from-hell bats.

He kinda hopes they're bats.

It's better than the alternative.

...

Nancy and Barb drive over to the Harrington household as soon as the last bell rings. It feels different approaching in daylight and without an invitation, like she's breaking some rule by acknowledging their relationship publicly. She wonders if the Harrington's are back from their business trip yet, if they know that their son is dating, if she needs a cover story.

They pull into the driveway. Steve's car is there in the exact spot it was the other night and it's the only one there. When Nancy walks past and rests her hand on the hood briefly, the engine is cool. When she rings the doorbell, no one answers.

Barb joins her side as she rings a second time. Gives her a look when she presses a third time.

"They're not home, we should go," she says.

Nancy bites her lip and walks over to the nearest window, peering in between the net curtains to look at the living room. She can't see any signs of life, so she paces back over to the door.

“Don’t,” Barb says.

“What?”

“I know that look. You’re about to do something incredibly reckless.”

“No,” Nancy denies. “I’m just... making sure that everything is alright. If you think about it, I’m just being a good girlfriend.”

Barb snorts, shaking her head.

“Besides,” Nancy says, twisting the door handle and letting the door swing open. “It’s not breaking and entering it’s open.”

She steps inside, hears Barb hesitate and then follow, closing the door gently behind them.

“Steve?” Nancy calls. “Steve? Are you here?”

The house is still and silent.

She steps into the living room cautiously, suddenly afraid that someone is home despite her bravado. The further she steps inside though, the less she worries. There’s a quietness around them that can’t be faked.

The room is decorated sparsely, a tv, sofa and coffee table placed centrally, and everything around left bare apart from a sideboard that houses a record player and two photo frames. She didn’t get a good chance to look around the other night and she takes a moment to appreciate how clean and tidy everything is. Regretfully, she wonders how differently the party might have gone if they’d stayed inside and put on some music instead. Thinks of Steve holding her close as they dance to Queen.

Curiously, she wanders to the photographs to have a look. The first is of the Harrington’s as a young couple, perhaps when they first met. They look happy; Mr Harrington has his arms around Mrs Harrington and their smiles stretch widely. The other is of Steve, obviously on a match day. He’s holding a trophy, cheeks flushed, Tommy clapping him on the shoulder.

“Hey, Nancy!”

Barb’s voice floats through from another part of the house. Nancy follows the sound until she comes to the kitchen, sees her friend standing at the sink and staring out of the window and into the back yard. She stands in the space next to her and tries to follow her gaze.

The pool is uncovered, the heat still on. There are leaves floating around idly, the soft breeze guiding them in circles. The air steams slightly where the water meets the air.

Next to the pool, chairs are still laid out exactly where they’d been the other night when they’d left. Nancy can practically see Steve shot gunning his beer, cigarette in his hand.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Look at that chair,” Barb says, pointing.

Nancy looks a little closer. There’s a towel draped across one of the loungers. It looks like it’s been there a couple of nights, judging by the bird shit on it.

“And there.”

Barb points at something by the steps of the pool. Nancy sees something, but not what is so impatiently she throws open the screen door and strides over to it. Frowns. It’s a dish cloth, stained with something red.

“Is that blood?” she asks Barb who’s now leaning down and poking it with a twig.

“I thinks so — but I think it’s mine. My thumb was bleeding quite a bit.”

Nancy grimaces. “Even so,” she says uncertainly, “it’s weird that it’s still out here, right? The rest of the house is so tidy.”

Barb straightens. “He was drunk,” she shrugs. “Maybe he forgot.”

“But the rest of the stuff has been cleared up,” she says, pointing to

the crate of cans by then back door. “And-”

She cuts off mid-sentence as she spots something new.

“Barb,” she says voice trembling.

There’s more blood. It’s on the edge of the pool, a bit further down from where they’re standing and it’s not immediately obvious, but it’s there. Dried onto the stone and settled into the cracks, two different spots roughly a foot apart. About a shoulder width apart.

“Something’s not right about this,” Barb says nervously, tugging at her sleeves.

Now that Nancy thinks about it, the pool water isn’t quite the colour it should be either. It was clearer the other night, she’s sure of it.

She thinks about Tommy’s concern earlier. About the empty house and the blood. About the car that hasn’t moved.

“Barb, I think something’s wrong.”

They meet each other’s eyes.

“I think we need to call the police.”

...

Hopper gets the phone call at ten in the evening on Wednesday.

He’s still at the station, stacks of papers in front of him, headlines burnt into his brain as he tries to make sense of all the information he’s seeing. There’s a terrible feeling in his gut and it’s not just at having Joyce thrown back into his life, at having all the reminders of the child he never got to have.

When the phone rings, he almost doesn’t answer it, content to let Flo or one of the others — god forbid Callahan does any actual work —

and it's only the thought of trying to understand these conspiracies for another minute that makes him pick it up.

He should have let it ring out.

As he pulls up at the lake twenty minutes later, sees the flashing lights, hears the shouts of the response teams as they work together to pull the body in to the shore he can't help but feel like he's dreaming.

He's barely aware of leaping out of the car, of striding forwards, demanding answers.

Will would have been one month older than Sarah. They should have gone to grade school together. Been on the same sports teams. Graduated at the same time. Now neither of them has lived long to make it to high school.

He stays as long as he needs to, tells Powell to sort out the rest. Sits in his car long enough to punch the wheel. Drives to the Byers house with grim determination and holds Joyce as she cries, knows that nothing he says can heal this hurt. Sees Jonathon pale and crumble.

They're too young. They're too good.

Of all the families in the world, the Byers have suffered too much already.

It's only as he gets back in his car to drive home that he realises he can't. He won't. For better or for worse, Joyce has been terrified out of her mind for the last four days and she's been coming to him for help.

Someone had rung in last night to say that they'd seen her running down the road, petrified.

So instead of going back to his cold bed in his empty cabin, he settles down in his seat. Pulls his hat further down his head and leans back.

Tonight, the Byers will have a protector.

Back at the station, a sober Florence answers an anxious call from

two teenage girls and schedules an interview.

3. nobody knows

The next morning, Nancy enters Hawkins Police Station for the first time in her life. It's both everything and nothing like she expects for a small town; a handful of people sat in or around the main office, coffee permeating the air and the walls plastered with notes and headlines that have been scribbled on. There's one right by the receptionist's desk from a 1975 edition of the Hawkins Herald that says: 'Town menace caught at last' with a picture of a screaming cat underneath. There's a sombre air to everyone, though, as if all the energy has been drained out of the room. Several people look as if they haven't slept at all, which makes sense if they were... well.

When Hopper finally arrives, he's late and there's a scowl already etched onto his face. His skin is grey and he smells like sweat and ash, as if he hasn't washed, a lit cigarette already in his mouth. Nancy watches him enter nervously, feeling out of place and small as he doesn't even spare them a glance, throwing his hat down onto his desk, shrugging his jack off and finally sitting down on a squeaky chair. She's suddenly glad that her mom is there with her, sat at her side.

"Mrs Wheeler. Nancy."

Nancy's mom squeezes her hand a little — it hurts, but she doesn't say anything. After Nancy and Barb split up last night, she'd come home to find her parents worried out of their minds. Mike was missing – Nancy hadn't come home after school – and there had been tearful hugs. When Mike finally appeared, he'd been pale and shaking, crying. Nancy had watched with wide eyes as her mom attempted to comfort him, as her dad held him close.

Will's body had been pulled out of the lake and Mike had watched it happen.

Hopper passes a hand over his face wearily, pulling a file closer towards him and scanning the paper quickly. "Says here you want to report a missing person."

Her mom looks at her expectantly and Nancy feels the weight of

responsibility. Wishes that Barb was here with her, but her parents had forbidden her to go anywhere after the news.

“Steve Harrington,” she says, and watches his eyebrow jump. “He goes to my school, he’s in the year above me. We’re... we’re dating.”

Hopper’s expression doesn’t change but she can feel his lack of interest in her dating life radiate off of him.

“Nobody’s seen him since Tuesday,” she says after a moment’s hesitation.

“You sure about that?”

Nancy nods. “I, um, wanted to talk to him about something but he didn’t come to school and he wasn’t answering the phone. Tommy and Carol - they’re his friends — they haven’t seen him either. And when I went around to his house, there was no one there.”

Hopper arches an unimpressed eyebrow. “His parents?”

“They’re out of town.”

“For how long?”

Nancy shrugs. “Steve just said it was for a couple of days. That was on Monday. Tommy might know more.”

Hopper leans back on his chair, plucks a cigarette from his pocket and lights it. He searches her face. “What else?”

“When I went to his house,” she says, “the door was still unlocked and his car hadn’t moved. It didn’t look like anything had been moved since the party-” she feels her mom bristle but not say anything; they’d already had the fight about that “-and there’s blood in the back yard. I think — there was a fight or an accident.”

Hopper’s face is unreadable. He takes a long drag. Plucks a plain piece of paper from his desk drawer and slides it over to her side of the desk. Nancy looks at him questioningly.

“I’m gonna be honest with you kid,” Hopper says, looking at her and

her mom in turn, “we don’t normally class someone as missing unless it’s been twenty four hours-”

“It *has* been twenty four hours-” Nancy says hotly before Hopper cuts her off with a wave of his hand.

“-maybe so, maybe not,” Hopper says. “But given recent circumstances, I’m willing to let that slide. Now, when a person goes missing, the odds go down after forty eight hours. Dependin’ on when Harrington went missing, we’re around halfway through that time.”

“We heard about Will Byers,” Nancy’s mom says, talking for the first time since they sat down. Her voice is uncharacteristically shaky and Nancy feels her anxiety rise. “Do you think that this boy- Steve-”

“Before this week, there’d been one suicide the last twenty years. Now there’s been one, possibly two, in the space of two days,” Hopper says evenly, flicking ash off his cigarette. “I check facts. I don’t guess.”

Nancy feels a surge of anger unexpectedly. Her free hand fists in the fabric of her skirt. “Steve didn’t *kill* himself,” she says hotly. “He didn’t have an *accident* by the *quarry*. He’s missing!”

“You’ve known Steve a long time?” Hopper asks, leaning back. His tone is casual, catching her off guard. Too casual.

“I — uh,” Nancy stumbles, confused. “We go to the same school,” she says.

“But you’ve been dating for a while.”

“Well, no, but-”

“Just friends, then? For how long?”

Nancy flushes, thinking back to when Steve had first started paying attention to her at the beginning of the school year. The long looks, bumping into her at her locker. Asking for her help in English.

Hopper doesn’t wait for her answer.

“But you know him well enough to know if likes to go for walks in the woods? How his home life is? Whether he’s ever done something like this before?” Hopper shakes his head and stands. The chair scrapes against the wooden floor and he reaches for his hat. He waves at the sheet of paper in front of her. “Fill that in. Write down everything you know. When you last saw him, who was with him, if there’s anyone who might have a grudge. I’ll send Officer Powell in to help.”

“Where are you going?” her mom asks, rising out of her chair. “You can’t just leave, what about this boy-”

“I’m doin’ my job,” he says, shouldering his jacket. “I’d sure appreciate if you could do the same.”

The door swings shut behind him.

Nancy looks at the empty paper in front of her and back to her mom, despair beginning to fill her stomach.

...

Hopper stays true to his word and heads over to the Harrington house straight away. There’s an uneasy feeling in his stomach that is only a little to do with the events of last night. There’s something wrong here, and he’s starting to wonder what god he pissed off to be tortured like this.

For Hawkins to have been so quiet for so many years and then in the space of one week have a suicide, a kid dead in the quarry and another missing...

As he drives, he tries to dredge up everything he’s ever heard or seen about Harrington. The kid’s trouble, he knows that. He’s known for having outrageous parties that he’s had to break up more than once, floods of drunk and high teenagers stumbling away the moment they see his lights approaching. Steve is usually the last to appear, a drink in hand and cocky smile on his face as he makes a smart ass

comment.

He's been tempted to put him in the station overnight more than once. And, he remembers, Fred Neilson had rung to complain about him only the other day.

Now he thinks about it, he doesn't blame him. The kid is a rich asshole.

The large house appears before him and he pulls to a stop haphazardly in the driveway. Just as Nancy had said, the door is unlocked and he's able to enter easily.

This is his first time actually inside the house. The place is extravagant, the opposite of his own little cabin or Joyce Byer's home. He can instantly feel the wealth dripping from every item of furniture here, even if there isn't too much of it.

He wanders through the downstairs quickly, takes note of the bed sheets in the dryer, the cans by the back door. There's a joint rolled on the counter, untouched.

It's a little eery. This is supposed to be a family home, but it's completely empty. There's dust beginning to gather on the kitchen sides and when he runs a finger along a picture frame in the living room, there's enough to suggest it hasn't been dusted in weeks, if not months.

The back yard is empty, too, apart from a few chairs gathered next to the pool and the dirty cloth. Hopper kneels down to inspect it, spies out the blood on the stonework.

The thing is, it doesn't look like there was a fight. Nothing is quite in its place but it's also obviously not *out* of place. There are no signs of a scuffle, nothing to suggest that anything is wrong apart from this small bit of blood which could easily have come from a scraped knee.

With a sigh, Hopper straightens up and heads back inside, towards the bedrooms. He pushes open the door to the first one he finds – Christ, each room in this house is practically the size of his cabin – and looks around slowly.

It's Steve's room; the room of a teenager in almost every cliché possible. There are band posters stuck on the wall, sports shoes kicked off in the middle of the floor, a musty smell of sweat emanating from a laundry bag that's tucked away in the corner. There are papers strewn over the desk, open textbooks piled on top of each other. The bed is made but there are clothes strewn across it. A few shirts, some slacks, a couple of jumpers. An open beer can is sat on the bedside table.

At first glance, this is not the room of someone who expected to be leaving.

Hopper walks inside, smoke clouding in front of his face as he takes a drag of his cigarette. This is what Will's room could have looked like, if only he'd lived.

A piece of paper catches his eye. It's pinned to the noticeboard above the desk. The paper is still white and uncreased showing its lack of age. Gently, he unpins it.

'Steve,' it reads. 'Your father and I have been called back to New York. We're opening a new branch and it's essential that we oversee its operation, at least to begin with. It's probably going to be a few months until we can come back. We're staying at the usual place, if you need to get in touch. With love, Mum.'

Then, underneath, in a script that's messier and more smudged, 'PS He's sorry about last night.'

Hopper frowns. He folds the paper up and tucks into his top pocket distractedly.

"Flo," he says into his radio, waiting for her reply before continuing. "I need you to try and get in touch with the Harringtons. Try going through their company, their New York office if they have one. I want to talk to them as soon as possible."

He's already got a hunch, and it's not a good one.

He goes to the parent's bedroom next, looks around at the dust covered surfaces. The bed is perfectly made, the curtains drawn, but

there's a slightly musty smell. Hopper opens the closet door and sees empty rails. There a couple of slacks and skirts, faded and worn – the type of clothes that the Harrington's wouldn't be seen dead in.

It looks more like a hotel room than a home.

On the one hand, it makes sense if they're going to be gone for a few months. On the other, if you knew that you needed to get out of town quickly...

'Ninety-nine times if a kid goes missing, it's a parent,' he remembers saying to Joyce – then thinks of the party, of the fact that people had been in the house. Thinks that maybe, if you're drunk and alone and your parents have left, the chances of doing something stupid rise drastically.

The question is, what brand of stupid is Steve Harrington?

The kind that runs away? The kind that goes on an impromptu rich kid vacation? The kind that gets lost in the woods?

It's because he's deep in thought, trying to piece everything together that he doesn't quite notice the light flicker. The flash is in his peripheral vision, in the landing, and at first, he thinks it's a trick of the light, but then it happens again. He isn't anywhere near a light switch, but the main overhead light goes, on and off in the blink of an eye. Hopper jumps and swings round, already drawing his gun.

"Hello?" he calls. "Who's there?"

Cautiously, he steps out into the hallway, looks down the stairs, but he can't see anyone. The hair on the back of his neck stands on end and he can hear the blood rushing in his ears, sounding almost like static.

He edges down the stairs slowly, gun still raised.

In the living room, on the phone table that's just visible from where he's stood, the answer machine clicks into life. Of course, the Harringtons are wealthy enough to own one. The tape starts whirring, a recording light flashing even though the phone hasn't rung.

“Harrington? Is that you?” he calls. “Come out slowly and with your hands in the air.”

“H-hello?”

Hopper jumps. The voice isn’t coming from somewhere in the house. It’s tinny and crackly – as if it’s coming from the answer machine.

“Carol? Tommy?”

He lowers his gun, steps closer, into the doorway of the room. There’s no one there; there’s no sign of disturbance, no sound of anything else apart from the machine.

He’s beginning to think no one was ever here at all.

“Fuck me, if anyone can hear me, you need to help me, this place is fucked up, man and I don’t know how to get back-”

Whoever is talking, their voice is panicked, talking quickly and with short, sharp breaths. A screech, loud and startling and unlike anything Hopper has heard before, cuts him off.

A bad phone line, he tells himself. That’s all it is.

“Fuck, shit, fuck,” says the voice. Something crashes. Someone yells. And then there’s nothing but white noise for one, two, three seconds and then the machine clicks off.

Hopper stares at it for another few seconds, an instinct stopping him from holstering his gun. He’s not sure what’s just happened or what he’s just listened to, but he knows that somehow, this all fits together.

Harrington’s disappearance, the blood in the yard, this phone call. Whoever was on the other end was in trouble.

Slowly, he lowers the gun. He goes to the answer machine cautiously, as though moving will startle it back into life, but when nothing happens, he pockets the tape.

Flashing lights, electrics going haywire and voices of people who

aren't there? He's beginning to think that Joyce Byers might not be as crazy as she seems.

...

Steve runs.

That screech, that sound of whatever animals populate this fucked up apocalyptical wasteland, was a lot closer than any other time he's heard them since he was first dragged here.

The phone hits the floor – why had he thought that would work, why did he think someone would pick up – and he dives out the hole in the doorway that he made on the way in, reaching out to grab the metal pipe he's been using as a weapon on his way past..

A plant by the doorway squirts at him, just like it did on the way in but this time he manages to catch it with a protective arm rather than getting it on his face. There's a thudding sound, the earth trembles a little beneath his bare feet and Steve's heart rate hits the roof.

He sprints for the woods, feeling twigs rip into his feet as he goes but he know, holding onto the pipe he's been using as a weapon for dear life, knowing without even looking that that thing is behind him and holy fucking shitballs-

This whole trip had been useless; the gun wasn't there and instead he'd cried when he looked into his bedroom, or what should be his bedroom, and saw the bare, rotten bones of everything he owned.

Something hits his shoulder.

He falls. Rolls to the side, stares up into the face of the thing that's turned his life upside down for the first time.

It's... horrific.

It's made of twisted sinew and flesh like a carcass that's been sitting

on the roadside for a few days, a fucked up vision of a human gone wrong. It has talons that look as sharp as knives and its face-

Steve screams, high and loud, pisses himself a little bit but there's no time to be embarrassed.

He claws the ground, tries to drag himself forward and get his legs underneath himself but the thing grabs him and pulls.

He twists, swings the metal pipe that he's been carrying all this time as hard as he can, hits flesh and feels the thing recoil, grip loosening on his ankle. He screams again. Swings again and this time there's enough time for him to turn and run.

His ankle is in so much pain, his knees is bleeding, but he goes for it, fear taking over.

If he falls one more time, he's pretty sure he's not going to be getting back up. A branch whips him in the face and he stumbles, changes direction because he's accidentally headed towards the quarry and there have got be bad connotations about heading towards a two hundred foot drop willingly.

The thing, the monster, screeches again but it sounds slightly further behind him. He doesn't look back to check, can't slow down for even a second.

His decision to run track last year suddenly seems like the best idea of his life.

He hits a slope, piles of rotting leaves making it difficult not to slip and he grabs onto tree branches on his way down to stop himself from slipping. The vines are everywhere, even out here and he jumps over one that threatens to trip him.

Something grabs his leg. Again.

He grunts, hitting the ground hard, face first. He's being pulled backwards but it doesn't feel like the talons from the monster, it feels gentler, softer. He tries to turn but the pipe has been ripped from his hand in the fall and all he's got left to fight with are his fists.

He opens his mouth to scream and something covers it, the pulling stops and he swings a fist blindly. Whatever is on him moves out of the way.

“Shut up,” it says.

Steve stills instantly. Squints up. He’s been pulled into a hollow in the hill, a tree root system forming a kind of roof and a vine blocking half of the entrance. And instead of a monster, the thing holding him is-

is-

“Will Byers?”

4. trying my best

Notes for the Chapter:

I wish that you could see the pain
that I've seen and
All of the time I spent being not me
and
I hope you know it's not always
happy
In my head

- 'Trying my best' / Anson Seabra

“Shut up,” Will says, hand still pressed against Steve’s mouth.

He’s small, mousy, with the same haircut that Jonathon Byers has borne for most of his life. His hair is greasy and lifeless. Shorts, torn at the hemlines. He looks seriously ill. There’s no mistaking the family resemblance and Steve stares at him in shock.

They wait in silence for what feels like a lifetime.

The only sound is their breathing; Steve is still trying to catch his breath, made harder by the fact that Will is still sat on his chest.

Cold water sinks into his back, trickling down his pants.

Something small crawls over his ankle.

Finally, just as Steve is beginning to think that he’s going to die with Will Byers sat on his chest, the kid climbs off him and takes his hand off of his mouth.

“Sorry,” Will says. The moment he’s not on full alert, he folds into himself, small frame hunching over and arms crossing over his chest as he holds his elbows. “It goes away, eventually, if you stay still enough.”

He coughs, shoulders shaking.

Steve sits up as much as he can – the whole space is so small that he's practically still lying down – and looks at him in disbelief.

"You're Will Byers," he says again and the kid nods miserably. "You've been – you went missing. You've been here the whole time?"

Will nods again. Steve swears.

"Steve, right?" Will asks.

"Yeah, how-"

"Dustin has a crush on Nancy," Will says like that explains everything. "I mean, we play Dungeons and Dragons at Mike's house. And Dustin has liked Nancy ever since she agreed to play a game with us. But she's dating you."

Then, "Are there other people here as well?"

Steve's heart breaks. This kid has been in this place, alone, for days. Steve's had about four breakdowns already; he doesn't know how Will is still so put together.

"You're the first person I've seen," he says.

Will shivers and draws his knees up to his chest. He looks so small, so thin, so ill. Steve shuffles a bit.

"Come here," he says.

"What?"

"You're cold – we should share body heat. Don't worry, I'm not a fag or anything."

Will stares at him for a moment, looking for something and Steve gets the feeling like he's being judged for... something. Then the kid relents and shuffles over, pressing himself to Steve's body.

Like this, Steve can feel exactly how ill the kid is. His back is just a

mass of bones, and his shivers are practically convulsions.

“W-we should compare notes,” Will says.

And that’s how they spend the next hour. Steve tells him about the pool party, about the monster grabbing him and dragging him into this world, about his escape and his hunt for food and shelter. In return, Will tells him about how he was chased and hunted, how he managed to get away - ‘I’m good at hiding,’ he says, quietly – and how he’s been staying close to his house, how he thinks he can communicate with the other side. With his mom.

“I think we’re in some kind of parallel dimension,” Will says. “Like, it’s a copy of our world but different, and somehow there are links between the two. Like gateways. I think the more ties you have to a place back home, the more able you are to communicate.”

“You can talk to people?” Steve asks, hope gripping him for the first time.

“Not really. It’s like electricity is the only way I can talk. I tried ringing the house phone and mom answered, but she couldn’t hear me. Sometimes I can turn lights on and off.”

“But we can use that!” Steve says. “If we can communicate with them, maybe they can contact us, or make their own gateway!”

Will shrugs, his shoulders digging into Steve’s chest. His face is turned away.

“You alright, kid?” Steve asks.

Will shrugs again. “How long have I been here?” he asks, voice quiet, almost lost even in the still air and confined space.

“A couple of days, I think,” Steve says, remembering Jonathon Byers at school, looking lost and desolate.

“It feels like longer.”

They lapse into a silence, long enough that Steve thinks that Will has fallen asleep. When he feels Will’s body quivering, he realises he’s

wrong. He's crying.

"Hey, hey," Steve says in what he hopes is a soothing voice. He's never had to deal with crying kids before. Hell, he can't even remember Carol or Tommy crying when they were kids. And his parents... well, they've never really been around long enough to soothe him. He wants to say 'what's wrong', but feels like an idiot even thinking it.

What's wrong? Oh, just being chased and mauled by monsters in a parallel dimension where there might be no escape, while they slowly starve to death.

"Hey," he says again, "we're in this together. You're not alone. We're going to get out of here, okay? We're gonna talk to your mum, we're gonna make a plan."

"The monsters are out there," Will snivels.

"Well, we'll sneak past them," Steve says, warming up to his theme. "I'm stealthy. Like a ninja. I'll teach you."

Will makes a sound of disbelief, mixed with a tiny snort that sounds like it might be amusement.

"Yeah, you've been here for a few days and you've not been caught by them, it'll be easier now there's two of us. One of us can keep watch while the other sleeps. I'll find another weapon. We can do this."

Steve feels a sense of calm he's not felt since he first felt that thing on his leg, back at the pool. It's almost like having someone to take care of, someone depending on him, makes him able to feel in control. Like he doesn't have time to worry about his own fears because he's got to look after someone else's.

"When was the last time you ate? Or slept?" he asks.

Will's silent for a moment, wipes some snot from his face. "I found some beans when I first got here," he says. "I can't remember when I slept. Every time I try, I keep waking up."

“Hang on,” Steve says, reaching into the waistband of his trousers as best he can in the small space, digs around for a moment and pulls a packet out. “Here, have this.”

He passes the packet over to Will who clutches at it with trembling hands. It’s some instant pasta, the kind you’re supposed to boil up with sauce already in it. He’d found it in his kitchen while he was looking for the shotgun. It was the only thing he’d been able to find but he’s especially glad now.

“What about you?” Will asks.

“I had some soup earlier,” he says. “Eat it. Really. You need it more than me.”

Will rips open the packet and starts eating, the crunch of the dry pasta startlingly loud. He doesn’t eat it all, Steve notices, but rolls the packet up when he’s halfway through and clutches it tightly to his stomach.

“You should sleep,” Steve says. “I’ll keep watch.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“I’ll watch over you,” he promises. “If I hear anything, I’ll wake you up.”

Will doesn’t protest more, just readjusts slightly so that his arms are pillowing his head. Within moments, his breathing has evened out a little – although still crackly, Steve notices – and his body stops shaking.

Jesus. Steve can’t even imagine how exhausted and scared he must have been, in this place all alone.

He closes his eyes briefly, tries to listen for any suspicious noises outside. He can’t hear anything apart from Will, though, so he relaxes a tiny bit. Tries to focus on his plan, instead.

If Will really can talk to his mom, that’s their best bet. He’d said that it worked better in places with strong connections, which rules out Steve’s house because no one’s there and probably won’t be for

months. Trying the phone earlier had been an act of desperation but he'd been on the right track, it would have worked if, y'know, someone was actually home. Maybe. He still doesn't know how talking to Mrs Byers will help, exactly, because he's pretty sure that she doesn't have any experience with parallel dimensions, but any contact with the real world is something.

And she's an adult. She'll have a better idea of what to do than him.

The responsibility is settling on his shoulders now. He remembers Jonathon Byer's pale face again; thinks about the friends that Will talked about so fondly; thinks about the worry that Mrs Byers must be feeling. Suddenly, he realises that he might be the only thing making sure that she sees her little boy again. Or the reason why she won't.

He takes a shaky breath, tightens his arms around Will protectively. Thinks about his parents in whichever out of state office they're working in at the moment. Wonders whether anyone has even noticed that he's missing. Silently, he makes a promise to himself.

He's going to keep this little boy safe, as best he can. He's worth more to more people.

...

"Jonathon! Hey, Jonathon Byers, wait up!"

Nancy runs to catch up to Jonathon as he storms up the street, brushing her hair out of her face as he stops and turns to look at who's yelling at him. He looks annoyed, but he gives her a half smile when he sees her anyway.

"Hey," she says gently. "I'm sorry about Will. He was a good kid and I- I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say."

Jonathon looks down. His eyes are red and puffy, skin pale. He looks like he's been crying ever since he heard the news. "Sure," he says.

“Look, I know this is a really difficult time for you and that you have arrangements to make, but I really need to ask you some questions.”

“This, uh, isn’t a good time, Nancy,” he says. “I need to get to the funeral home. Whatever you need to ask, I’m sure it can wait.”

“No, it can’t,” Nancy says firmly, grabbing his arm as he turns to walk off. “What happened to Will is a tragedy and I have no idea what you’re going through right now but Steve is missing and I think that whatever happened to him and whatever happened to Will could be related.”

“Steve? Steve Harrington?” Jonathon asks, then shakes his head, readjusting his bag strap. “I don’t know who you’ve spoken to, but Will fell off the quarry and drowned. My brother drowned and now he’s dead and I don’t know why no one can accept that!”

Jonathon starts crying, rubs the heel of his hand furiously against his face. Nancy looks away, feeling remorse and guilt. Then she remembers the blood by Steve’s pool and finds her confidence again.

“I’m sorry,” she says, “You’re right. But please, I know you take your camera to school every day. At the very least, do you have any photos from the last few days? Anything I can use to see if anything was out of the ordinary?”

Jonathon stills suddenly, his shoulders tensing. He looks at the ground again, shifts his feet. There are still tears on his face but he ignores them.

“I might have something,” he says.

“You do?” Nancy asks, surprised.

“But I need to go to the funeral home. Uh, meet me at the café on the corner at four.”

“Okay,” Nancy says. Jonathon turns on his heel and walks off quickly, hunched over even more than when she first saw him. She watches him until he turns the corner.

That was interesting.

...

Hopper sits on the chair that's a foot too short for him and watches with narrowed eyes as Tommy Hagan and Carol Perkins take seats in front of him. They look both annoyed and intrigued to have been called in, all the curiosity of being a kid but with all the snobbery of being the high school elite. Tommy slouches immediately, looking around the room disinterestedly, but Hopper can see how tense he actually is by the muscle that keeps jumping in his jaw and the too tight fist by his side. Carol, on the other hand, flicks her hair over her shoulder and stares directly at him with hostility.

Hopper tries not to glare at her too hard.

He hates this school, has done ever since he was the spotty teenager that used to go here, and now he's been forced to visit twice in the same week. At least this time he's been given a room to himself, no teachers breathing down his neck.

"Tommy, Carol," Hopper acknowledged. Leans forward in his chair and blows smoke directly into their faces. "Know why you're here?"

Tommy sits upright. "Is this about the party I had last Wednesday, because if so-"

"It's about Steve Harrington."

Tommy immediately straightens up, face paling. Carol glances over at him sharply. Hopper notes every shift and catalogues it.

"Is Steve in trouble?" Tommy asks.

"Why don't you tell me? Sounds like you were the last person to see him," Hopper says.

"He's missing?"

"Since Tuesday night, as far as we can make out. Do you have any

light you'd like to shed on the situation?"

Tommy sneers. "What are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything." Hopper leans back on the chair, the plastic squeaking underneath his weight. "I'm asking. What happened on Tuesday night? And when was the last time you saw Steve?"

"Look, it's not a big deal," Carol says. Her voice has a slightly whiny, nasal quality to it. "He does this sometimes."

"Does what?"

"He just... disappears," Tommy shrugs. "Not often. Just like, he has a rough day or whatever and we don't see him for a couple of days. He doesn't come to school, doesn't come to practice, doesn't answer the phone."

"Yeah, and then he comes back as if nothing's happened," Carol continues. "Our Stevie's a strange boy but whatever makes him tick, y'know?"

"I don't," Hopper says coolly. It's interesting, he thinks, that the girlfriend immediately panicked and called the police, but the two friends haven't batted an eyelid. "His parents let him?"

"Sometimes," Tommy says. "He's had a few fights with his old man about it, but he's usually away. His mom's more chill about it. The schools stopped caring 'cause he always comes back and he helps us win sports, so."

Hopper blows smoke at them again. Carol coughs and waves a hand to try and disperse it. "Could you not?" she mutters.

"Tuesday night," Tommy says. "That was when we saw him last. We went to bed before Steve and he wasn't there when we woke up."

"We thought he'd gone to Nancy Wheelers," Carol says.

Hopper leans back and lets them sweat for a moment. There's not much new information here, really. Steve fights with his dad but gets on better with his mom... that fits with the note he'd seen.

“He ever give a reason for disappearing?” he asks eventually.

Tommy and Carol share a look.

“Does he need one?” Tommy gives a little self conscious laugh. “We all have days when we don’t wanna do shit.”

Hopper doesn’t say anything, just stares him down.

“Look, it’s Steve, alright? He’s the ‘King of Hawkins High’, he plays basketball, he throws parties and dates girls. He’s got nothing to hide. So what if he likes to hide occasionally? Fuck knows I would if I could get away with it.” He sniggers and nudges Carol as if to say, ‘and you know exactly what I’d do if I could’.

Hopper tries his damned hardest not to roll his eyes. “Alright, you can go. Both of you. But if you hear from Harrington – call the station.”

Carol is already halfway out of the door by the time he’s finished the sentence, her bag swinging against the doorframe as she leaves. Tommy stands more slowly, taking his time and hesitating as soon as Carol has disappeared.

“Steve’s not in trouble, right?” he asks, and for the first time he sounds like a vulnerable kid, worried about his friend.

“I hope not, kid,” Hopper says heavily. He shakes his head, thinking about Benny’s corpse, about pulling Will Byers out of the lake, about the two hunters that have gone missing. About electronics that start of their own accord and lights that flash on and off.

Then he thinks about a kid fighting with his parents, who has a history of disappearing for days at a time with no word, who drinks and smokes too much; thinks about exactly how many times he’s seen that pattern before and how it always ends up.

“I hope not,” he says again but Tommy’s already gone.

...

“What’s going on, Jonathon,” Nancy asks as Jonathon sits at the table opposite her. She’s chosen a booth in the corner, as hidden from sight as they can be for reasons that she doesn’t quite understand.

Jonathon seems to have gained a bit of equilibrium from earlier. His eyes are no longer as red and he’s washed his face at some point in the last hour. He reaches into his satchel and pulls out a wad of photos, puts them on the table but keeps his hand on them.

“I need to explain,” he says. “Before you look at them.”

Nancy narrows her eyes.

“I was, uh, looking for Will the other night. I was in the woods near where he went missing and I was taking photos. Sometimes the camera sees things that you don’t, y’know, but then I heard this scream. I thought it might be him so I went towards it. I thought I’d find him and save him but-” Jonathon cuts off for a moment. Swallows. Continues. “It was Carol and Tommy. At Steve’s house.”

“You were there?” Nancy asks, aghast. “You were watching?”

“I was looking for Will,” Jonathon says again. “By the time I realised it wasn’t him, I was already there. And I don’t know why but instead of leaving, I stayed.”

Nancy juts her chin out. Angry and defiant. “I can’t believe you,” she says. “You were spying on us? You took *pictures* of us?”

Jonathon shrugs, refusing to meet her eyes. “I don’t know why,” he says quietly. “I just- Sometimes people say things. With their bodies, without speaking. That’s why I take pictures. I try to understand people with them and show who they are. You were all saying something that night, so I took pictures.”

He shoves the photos towards her.

“I hope they help,” he says.

She snatches them up and starts sifting through them immediately,

barely aware that he's standing up to leave.

Tommy and Carol messing about in the water. Steve throwing her in. Barb standing in the doorway. Her kissing Steve goodnight, leaving with Barb. Steve sat by the pool.

"Jonathon, wait!"

Nancy looks up, sees him hesitate.

"This picture, here," she says, pointing. "Do you see that?"

It's the one of Steve. He's staring into the water, his expression barely visible through the grainy quality. He's still wearing his sweater and shoes. Nancy loses herself for a moment, wondering what was going through his mind.

"See what?" Jonathon asks and she snaps out of it.

"There, look," she says, pointing to the background. The angle the photo is taken at shows some of the trees that line the Harrington's back yard and in the corner, there's a dark shape, tall and humanoid but-

"No face," Jonathon breathes.

"Who is that?" Nancy asks. "What is that? Did you see it?"

Jonathon shakes his head. "I didn't see anything, I swear. But sometimes cameras can show things we can't see." He speaks slowly, as if he's putting something together. "My mom..."

"What about her?"

"She said she saw something. Something without a face. I didn't believe her, I thought the grief was driving her mad but maybe she did see something, maybe it was this."

Nancy looks back down at the picture, wishes that the picture was somehow more clear, better quality, anything that would help her understand better.

“I want in,” Jonathon says.

“I’m sorry?”

“Whatever you’re planning on doing, I want in. You were right. What happened to Will... whatever happened to Steve, they’re connected somehow. And whatever that thing is, I want to get it. For Will. I want to get revenge for my brother.”

Nancy looks him in the eye. She has a feeling that what they’re deciding to do, they can’t turn back from.

“Deal,” she says.

5. can you hear me

“This is it, huh?” Steve asks, looking out over the house in front of him.

The Byers’ home doesn’t look like much compared to his own, but it looks like it could be nice, maybe, without all the vines and rotting wood. There are a couple of houses nearby but not too close, all with their own large back yard. Far enough away that an eleven year old boy screaming for help might not be heard, he thinks, remembering Will’s description of how he had been taken.

Will nods, chin jutting into his shoulder. Steve’s ankle still hurts like hell – has been getting worse, even, without proper rest – but he’d seen how much Will was shaking earlier, so he’d insisted on carrying him all the way out here on his back.

“Okay, then,” he says, “let’s do this thing.”

Will clambers down and starts towards the house without hesitation, though he does look back to make sure that Steve is following.

Steve rubs his shoulders, relieved to have the weight off his back and hobbles after. The house opens immediately into a small sitting room. It feels lived in; old furniture that has worn patches, dents and marks on the walls. The only thing that stands out – and he’s immediately ashamed it took him that long to notice – is the far wall that has the entire alphabet painted on in large, black letters. Will follows his gaze.

“She did that last night,” he says. “So we can talk.”

“How does it work?” Steve asks.

“I don’t know. I think it’s through electricity – that’s mostly how it’s worked so far. I think that maybe she’s put something up in our world that doesn’t come through here. But we can interact with it.”

“That’s... insane,” Steve says. “And you’re insanely smart. Like, holy shit, kid, you’re probably smarter than most people I know.”

Will gives a small smile but doesn't answer.

"So your room? That's where you've been able to talk most?"

Will nods and leads him down the corridor into a small room. There's a bed, some things on the shelves, just like in every other building he's been in it's almost like it should be but not quite. Like a VCR where the tape has been scratched – most of the parts have loaded, but not all, and it doesn't quite look or sound like it should.

Will reaches out and touches a record player and almost instantly, sound starts playing.

"Should I stay or should I go now..."

It's a new single that Steve's heard on the radio a few times, but it's not coming from this record player. The sound is distant and echoey, slightly muffled like it's playing from another room. Will seems undisturbed and starts bobbing his head along to the music, like he's done this before. That's the point though, isn't it; he has.

Will stiffens.

"What is it?" Steve asks.

"It's my mom," Will says and runs from the room, sprinting faster than Steve thought he could. "Mom! Mom!"

Steve follows, unable to hear anything – except, maybe a distant echo, though he can't make out any details. Will seems hell bent, though, and Steve remembers him saying that it depended on the connection you had to the place or person in the real world.

"Mom!" he yells again. "I'm here!"

He runs out the front door and starts banging on the walls from the outside. Steve hesitates, not knowing what to do, but he follows.

The music's stopped now and he thinks he can hear a voice more clearly.

Will is banging on the wood with both hands, desperate and

pleading, tears streaming down his face. “Steve, help me,” he says. “She’s there, she’s in there, but I can feel her more out here.”

Steve doesn’t understand what he’s saying, not really, but he listens anyway. “Move out of the way,” he says and grabs a large tree branch from where it’s fallen to the ground. He hefts it, gets a feel for its weight, and then swings it at the wall.

He hits again, and again, and again until the wood splinters and breaks and he resorts to fists. There’s a hole in the wood now, but instead of showing the inside of the house, there’s some weird kind of film like a distorted window and on the other side he can see plaster, like the inside of a wall. He tries to punch through but the material, whatever it is, doesn’t give like it should.

“Will?” he hears a voice ask, clearer than anything before, and Steve is so shocked and *relieved* that he lets Will push him out of the way, pressing himself to the wall.

“Mom!”

“I’m here, I’m here!”

Something’s happening on the other side, the wall is rippling in a way that no solid material ever should and then the plaster is falling away and there’s a woman visible on the other side.

She’s vaguely familiar in a way that most people in the town are and if Steve was in the street, he’d probably walk right past her. But that family resemblance is there again, in the hair, in her face.

Will stops hitting the wall, stops fighting, just presses his face to the substance, presses his hand against it. “Mom,” he sobs.

Steve hears something behind him and turns, sees a shadow in the tree line. *Fuck*. He’d thought they’d have longer. “Will,” he says urgently, “c’mon, we’ve got to go.”

He hears it growl, the sound travelling through the air and he sees the exact moment Will hears it.

“Mom,” he says again, voice breaking, “it’s coming!”

Steve turns, runs back into the house, searches for something, anything. He's still got the small knife in his pocket but he needs something bigger, something to replace the pipe he lost. He sees a poker for the fire lying in the corner and grabs it, swings it, feels the adrenaline spiking as he prepares to fight.

He can't hear Joyce anymore but he can still hear Will talking, hear the panic and desperation in his voice. "It's like home but it's so dark. It's so dark and empty and it's cold, Mom. Mom?"

Steve checks back outside, can't see the monster any closer but can feel it, knows it's out there.

"Will, we need to go!" he says, panic making his voice louder and higher.

Will doesn't listen, just bangs against the wall again, sobs racking his body. Steve swears. He grabs him by the waist and swings him onto his shoulder in a fireman's lift, suddenly glad that he's so small and light. The monster is behind him so he runs in the opposite direction, to the back yard and the forest beyond.

"No," Will sobs, "no, take me back, Mom, MOM!"

He beats Steve's back with his fists, struggling to be let loose but Steve clings on tight. He's not going to let go, he's not going to let this kid suffer any more than he already has. He's going to protect him and keep him safe.

"Tell me where to go," he says. Talking's hard; he can barely talk when running at the best of times and now he's got a weight thumping against his shoulder, stomach and back with every step. "Will, we need to hide, tell me where to go!"

Will stops struggling, let's himself fall against Steve's back. He's still crying, Steve can hear him snivelling, but he seems to be coming back to himself.

"Will, help me out here," he says.

"Castle Byers," Will says finally. "We can hide in Castle Byers."

...

Hopper wakes in his own cabin and for a moment, he doesn't realise why that's strange. Then he does and he bolts upright, heart beating fast.

The morgue-

The lab-

Those *bastards*-

There are beer cans on the table that he doesn't remember drinking, his gun on the table and he grabs it, runs out of the cabin, door swinging so hard it hits the wall, and swings around wildly, trying to find the people who did this.

There's no one there so he stumbles back inside, checks his neck for the spot where they injected him and finds nothing.

By the time the madness in his head has settled, he's torn apart the entire place, bulbs smashed, cushions ripped and even moved the roof tiles – but he has found the bug they placed and has smashed it to the pieces.

He settles on the sofa, staring at the remaining parts.

Joyce was right. She was right this entire time. A government conspiracy, the supernatural, everything. Hopper's seen a lot in his life – has seen his daughter die, has been a part of war, has looked at the darkest that city people had thrown at him and come out the other side – but this is something else.

Someone knocks at the door.

Hopper leaps to his feet, gun in hand and heart racing. He opens the door slowly, expecting to see a uniform and a cold face, for the lab, the government to have changed their minds about letting him go.

Wonder whether he should start running.

Powell and Callahan stand on the stoop. They stare at him as he stills.

“Jeez, chief,” Callahan says as Powell whistles slowly, taking in the sweat patches on his underclothes. “What happened to you?”

Hopper stares at them for a moment before lowering the gun. “Nothing,” he says gruffly.

Powell gives him a disbelieving look. “Sure,” he says slowly. He pauses long enough for Hopper to feel the judgement, then says, “We got some updates on the Harrington case. Thought we’d come out here seeing as you weren’t answering the radio. State police gave us a call, they’ve talked to the Harringtons. All three of them. They’re in New York on a business trip... changed plans at the last minute, came back and picked the kid up. Case closed, I guess.”

“Case closed,” Hopper echoes.

There’s no way that Steve Harrington is in New York. Even if it weren’t for the feeling in his gut, he knows what he saw last night. And why the hell would state police get involved in a small town missing persons case?

“Chief?” Callahan asks. He’s frowning, looks worried and that look is aimed directly at him. He hates that.

“Yeah, sure,” he says. “Uh, I’ll meet you at the station in a bit. I just need to do a follow up.”

Powell and Callahan share looks but head back to the car anyway with a ‘sure thing, boss’ and a ‘catch you later’. Hopper watches them leave, then falls back on his sofa staring at the bug in front of him.

Steve Harrington never left Hawkins. Of that, he’s becoming increasingly sure. The kid hadn’t even taken the clothes of his bed, for christ sake. And the note he found pinned on the board – his parents had been away for days before he went missing. Sure, there’s the possibility that he ran away, or that he killed himself, but he didn’t take his car and no one’s found a body yet and there have been enough people searching for Will that it would have been found if

there was one. The lab ties into this somehow, he knows.

That room he'd found in there... the bed and the crayon drawing. He knows now that Will isn't dead. Or at least, that the body in the morgue isn't his. Whatever they're doing up there, they captured him and they kept him in that cell. What's to say there wasn't an identical cell for a teenager?

Something in his gut clenches. MKUltra had been fucked up enough as it was – what if there are still experiments going on? What if they've moved their experiments on to kids? Kids that they're taking away from families, one at a time?

Closing his eyes, he remembers Sarah. Remembers her tiny body in those large hospital beds. The weeks of uncertainty and fear. The months of knowing the inevitable. The tubes and the medication...

How could anyone do that to a kid willingly? How could anyone do that to a parent?

With shaking hands, he pulls the phone over, moves over to the floor so he can feel more comfortable. He dials the familiar numbers. Twists the hairband he always keeps on his wrist while he waits for it to connect.

"Hello?"

"Hey."

"Jim?"

"Yeah."

He sighs, looks at the ground. She's not pleased to hear his voice, he can tell, but a part of him needs this right now. Needs to remember what it was when he was happy, when he had a kid and a wife. When the world seemed simple and alright.

"Why are you calling me?" she asks softly, understanding even when she's upset. "I told you not to call me."

"I know, I know, I know," he says. "I just wanted to... I just wanted

to hear your voice and, uh... I just wanted to say, um..." he trails off for a moment, trying to find the words. "Even after everything that happened, I don't- I don't regret any of it. And those seven years, they were everything to me."

"Have you been drinking?"

"No."

A baby starts crying on the other end of the line. He stares at the coffee table as he hears her shush and comfort it, practically sees the ghost of her and Sarah in front of him on that very sofa. He swallows, guilt rising in his stomach.

She has a life now. He might never have recovered from losing his family but she has. She's happy now.

"You know what," he says, "actually, I have been drinking, I'm sorry."

"Jim, I can't-"

"Just take care of yourself, okay? Say hi to Bill for me."

He hangs up. A part of him, the part of him that fractured when Sarah died, is raging fierce and angry but he holds on to the part from before, the part that would have done anything to save his child, even if there was the smallest hope.

The newspaper reports from the library, the ones about Terry Ives and the MKUltra project are strewn over the table but he gathers them up as he grabs his coat.

He's not going to give up on Will, Joyce or Steve Harrington, so help him God.

Intimidation tactics didn't work on him in the army or in the city – they're not going to work on him now.

...

Nancy feels the leaves crunch beneath her feet and breathes the crisp, fresh air. She holds the gun in her right hand, the torch in her left. Jonathon is on her right, brandishing the bat. As a search party goes, they might be the most uncomfortable one in Hawkins. The silence between them is awkward and tangible. She keeps waiting for him to start the conversation, but he doesn't, utterly and completely focused on the task in front of them.

"You never said what I was saying," she says.

"What?"

"Yesterday," she continues. "You said that we were all saying something. That's why you took the pictures, at Steve's house. What was I saying?"

"Oh, uh," Jonathon mumbles, looking down at his feet and colour rising in his cheeks. He does that a lot, she's come to realise. Apologises for existing. Makes himself as small as possible. "I don't know."

She gives him a look, not believing him. If there's anything she's learnt since knowing him, it's that while he doesn't say what he thinks very often, his actions always have a meaning.

"I guess... I saw someone trying to be someone else. But when Barb cut herself, you came back to yourself. Like she reminded you who you are."

"That is such bullshit."

"What?"

"I am not trying to be someone else," she says, stopping and turning, ready for an argument. "Just because I'm dating Steve and you don't like him-"

"It wasn't just you," Jonathon says. "Steve was as well. I didn't notice when you were all together but after everyone left, he was sat outside by himself and... I don't know. People always reveal their truest self

when they're alone, you know?"

Nancy feels her anger dim a little. "What do you mean?"

Jonathon shrugs. "It was like, when everyone was around – you, Barb, Tommy and Carol – he was putting on some kind of act. Like a cool guy, trying to impress you all. But the moment he was by himself he kind of... deflated. He looked lost. And alone."

Nancy stares at him.

"You know what, forget it. I just thought it was a good picture."

She scoffs but lets it slide. She leads the march on again, thoughts swirling around her head. Maybe she is trying to be a little like someone else when she's around Steve – not that Jonathon knows that – but that's because she wants something fun.

"Why are you dating him anyway?"

This time Jonathon is the one to stop. He looks at her expectantly, waiting. There's genuine confusion on his face and she thinks it might be the first time he's ever looked her in the eye.

"I'm sorry?" she asks.

"He's such an asshole," Jonathon says. "He's mean to everyone. You know he's called me a fag behind my back for years? And he was the one who told everyone about my dad? And, you have to how he treats the girls at our school. He's had sex with most of them and then he just abandons them."

Nancy sneers, angry again. "It's none of your business who I date," she says. "Besides, he's actually a good guy."

"Okay," Jonathon says, disbelief clear in his voice.

"What he's like with other people, he's not like that at all. He just lashes out sometimes."

"Yeah, well lashing out sometimes has meant that my little brother has been bullied for his whole life. Was bullied."

He looks like he's going to cry and Nancy feels the guilt rise up in her, remembers why they're out here in the first place.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"No, it's fine," he says. "I get it now. I thought you were okay, that you weren't just another suburban girl who thinks she's rebelling by doing exactly what every other suburban girl does until that phase passes and they marry some boring one time jock, who now works sales, and they live out a perfectly boring little life at the end of a cul de sac. Exactly like their parents who they thought were so depressing but now, hey, they get it now."

"Hey-"

"Cause it's alright," Jonathon continues, "when the guy you like is kind of a dick as long as it isn't to you, right? Because it's not about you. You can wave it off and pretend like it doesn't happen. Well, guess what, Nancy Wheeler, it does happen and it hurts people."

He storms off and leaves Nancy waiting in his dust, jaw set and wondering what just happened.

6. in need of a savior

Notes for the Chapter:

A lil PSA, I posted the last chapter when the AO3 servers were down and I don't think the notification was sent out, so if you feel like you missed something when reading this, that might be why.

Yeah, I'd rather be a lover than a
fighter
'Cause all my life, I've been fighting
Never felt a feeling of comfort
All this time, I've been hiding

- Silence / Marshmello

The next few hours of searching are awkward. Nancy doesn't dare start another conversation and anger fills the air between them.

It gives Nancy time to think, though, although she's not sure that's a good thing.

Does she really know Steve?

Jonathon was very passionate about all those things he'd supposedly done... and well, he should be, she guessed, if they were true. But was the Steve she knew capable of those hurtful things?

She thinks back to school, thinks of Carol and Tommy. She can see it happening, has seen the laughs the three of them share in the hallways of school when Jonathon walks past.

Is that really who she wants to date?

And when she thinks about it in this way, she starts to question why she's even out here searching for him in the first place. A part of her knows that this isn't about her wanting him back. God, that's an awful thing to think, and it must be partly, because whatever has happened to him must be bad – it's already resulted in one death, and maybe his as well – but she doesn't care this strongly about him. For

heaven's sake, they've only been on three dates – if you could even call a secret rendezvous and a party dates.

She could let the police do their job, take the photo to them and explain her theory. She doesn't need to be out here with Jonathon Byers, the school creep, searching a rapidly darkening forest with a possible monster on the loose.

No, the reason she's out here has more to do with her burning curiosity, her need to know the truth behind everything. She's always loved a mystery; her dad calls her Nancy Drew affectionately, sometimes. The disappearance of Steve Harrington is definitely a mystery, and what's more, as she is becoming increasingly aware, so is Jonathon Byers.

Besides, she tells herself, Steve really *isn't* like that. When they're alone together he's sweet and tender. Sure, he's tried it on more than once, but he always listens to her when she tells him to slow it down.

Jonathon's words echo around her mind, too. *'He looked lost. And alone.'* She's reminded more than ever that technically, her boyfriend has been missing for longer than she's been dating him.

She's interrupted from her angry thoughts by the sound of something nearby – a whimper.

Jonathon hears her stop and turns. "What, are you tired?"

"Shut up," she says. She listens intently, but it's gone quiet again. "I heard something."

She follows the sound, weaving through the trees until she finds what's making the noise. She covers her mouth.

"Oh, god."

It's a deer that's been badly wounded. It's lying on its side, unable to move, whimpering in pain. She kneels down next to it, feels Jonathon do the same, hears his sigh.

"It's been hit by a car," she murmurs. Reaches out to touch it gently, soft fur parting between her fingers. Looks to Jonathon pleadingly.

“We can’t just leave it.”

The gun in her hand feels heavier than it did just a few minutes ago. She looks at it, makes the decision and starts to raise it.

“I’ll do it,” Jonathon says.

“I thought you said-”

“I’m not nine any more.”

He takes the gun from her hand, stands and aims. Nancy looks away, looks back, half closes her eyes in preparation. She wants to look away but can’t.

Then, just as Jonathon takes a deep breath, she can see his finger tightening on the trigger, it moves.

Something drags the deer away, quick enough that she doesn’t see what did it, just gasps and jumps back in shock. It’s there one moment, gone the next. Her heart starts pounding against her chest and she has to resist the urge to scream.

“What was that?” she asks shakily.

She doesn’t wait for an answer, just starts following the trail left by the body, searching out clues for what just happened with her torch. Her other hand holds the baseball bat higher in preparation of.

“Where’d it go?”

“I don’t know.”

The look around nervously. Jonathon has the gun raised, pointing it at every new sound.

“Do you see any more blood?” he asks and she looks around again, sees the smear where the deer was dragged and then- it just ends.

Jonathon starts walking in the direction the deer disappeared and she lets him because she’s just seen something in the tree.

It's right next to where they were standing, with a hollow in it that she hadn't noticed before. It's dripping something that for a moment she thinks is tree sap, but as she kneels down to look closer, realises it's not.

Her torch lights up the inside of the tree and instead of some dirt and tree roots like she expects to see, there's a path that stretches on. It's like Narnia in a tree.

"Jonathon?" she calls.

There's no reply. She looks around anxiously, seeing nothing but forest floor and trees. A sensible part of her brain is telling her to wait for him, that they shouldn't split up but another part tells her that time is of the essence.

She bites her lip nervously. Makes the decision. She takes the rucksack off her back, tucks the baseball bat between her arm and her torso, takes the torch and starts crawling.

She regrets it almost instantly. The not-tree-sap starts soaking into her hair, her jacket and her jeans. The deeper she goes into the tree, the less it feels like a tree and more like a human being. Like she's crawling through a human ribcage. Fleeshy, constricted and skeletal.

Then she's through and on the other side. She emerges into a cold wasteland that at first doesn't seem much different from the one she just left. But the air tastes like ash in her mouth; instantly, sound feels different, her own breathing too loud and too quiet all at once. Her torch starts flickering on and off, mimicking the frantic beat of her heart.

She stumbles forwards and up, balances on a tree covered in something that looks like a spider's web. Tries to wipe it off on her jeans but it's resistant, barely moving.

Her torch flickers again and she thumps it, trying to jiggle the batteries. As she does so, she casts the light blindly.

She jumps.

Accidentally, she's found the thing she hadn't realised she was

looking for. At once, she knows this is what took the deer, what took Will, what took Steve. It's pale in the moonlight, humanoid in shape but with a reptilian skin that stretches over protruding muscles and bones. It's turned away from her, feeding at something. The deer, probably.

She wants to scream, wants to panic but she knows she can't. This thing took her boyfriend, it can take her just as easily. Hesitantly, she takes a step backwards. Then another. She needs to get back to Jonathon, tell him what she's found. She needs the gun back; why did she give it to Jonathon?

One more step and then she fucks it up. A branch, a vine, something snaps and crackles beneath her foot and the monster stops feeding, turns and roars.

Nancy sees it's face for the first time, sees the rows of the teeth, the way it has folds that open out, and screams. The torch falls from her hands and she clutches the bat with both hands, turning and running.

"Nancy!"

She hears Jonathon's voice, distant and muffled but right there, she hears him calling out for her and it's like he's standing next to her but he's not. She spins around in a circle, bat raised, looking for any sign of him.

"Jonathon!" she screams. "Jonathon! Jonathon, I'm right here!"

"Nancy! Nancy, come on!"

Nancy tries to follow his voice, ends up running in a circle as she runs between trees. "Jonathon, where are you?! Jonathon!"

Her voice is too loud, her panting is bound to bring the monster to her but that's fine, she can escape, she can go back the way she came in.

She turns, and there it is. It's standing now, taller than she'd thought, just lying in wait for her. The bat falls from her hands now. She runs, again, hides behind a tree. Presses her back right against it, thinks to herself, this is it, this is how she's going to die.

It's moving towards her. She can hear each and every footstep it makes. It's growling, making strange noises, almost inquisitively.

"Nancy!"

The monster pauses, cocks its head and looks in the opposite direction and Nancy feels her whole world come down to this moment. Because that- that wasn't Jonathon's voice. That was-

"Steve?" she whispers.

"Nancy! Nancy, I'm here! Are you okay?!"

"Nancy, follow my voice!"

And that's Jonathon – she looks over towards where she can hear him, and there's the tree that she crawled through, her Narnia hell gateway.

She looks back towards the other voice – towards *Steve* – and hears the monster growl. Makes her decision.

Moments later, she lobs the bat as far as she can to distract the monster and she throws herself through that tiny hole between worlds, hands first, scrabbling with her feet and trying as hard as she can to just get through.

"Jonathon," she sobs and hears him call her name back.

Her hand breaks through the goo, whatever it is, and then Jonathon's holding her wrist and pulling, grunting with the effort. The monster's somewhere behind her, she can hear it, but then she's through and Jonathon is holding her and she clutches onto him tightly, sobbing.

He puts an arm around her back, panting. "I got you," he says. "You're safe."

Nancy sobs harder, buries her face into his neck and tries to pretend it's true.

...

Steve stumbles through the undergrowth, heart pounding and blood rushing through his ears. He can hear Will running after him but he pays no mind. He bashes at branches that get in his way with the poker and pushed forward.

“Nancy?” he yells again.

He’d heard her, he *had*, she had been right there, panicked and afraid.

She must be nearby. She’d been so close, her voice had sounded like it was only on the other side of that ridge and he’s over it now, she should be here.

“Steve,” Will pants from behind him, “Steve, stop.”

He doesn’t. He grabs a tree branch to pull him up a second steep incline and staggers as he reaches the top. Something catches his eye, out of place in the corner of his vision. Something pale and glinting.

He goes closer to examine it just as Will crests the hill beside him.

It’s a bat. A baseball bat, of all things, studded with nails and a chain. It looks like a weapon made to hurt and somehow, it has ended up here.

“Nancy?!”

Steve looks around wildly. She must have dropped this bat, she must have been dragged into this hellscape just like he had, but of course she’d managed to create a much better weapon than he had. But how had she ended up here? Had she been taken the night of the party as well? Had she been here the whole time? Were Tommy and Carol as well?

“She’s not here,” Will says quietly.

“Fuck that,” Steve says harshly. Will recoils. “I heard her. She was

right here. She was right *here*.”

He drops the poker, picks up the bat instead. It has a much better heft to it and he feels a lot more confidence with this to defend himself. This was *made* to hurt. Stubbornly, he presses forward, vaguely aware that Will is following him - although more quietly.

He feels a pang of unexpected guilt in his stomach. He shouldn't have snapped.

There's nothing to be seen. There's no trail, there are no other items dropped like breadcrumbs. No one calls his name.

Steve leans his head against a tree and sags. He closes his eyes.

Nancy had been here, she'd been screaming and she'd been scared. She'd dropped a bat studded with nails. And now she's disappeared again as if she had never been here to begin with.

As if she'd been taken.

Steve lets himself fall to the ground, back against the tree. He stares into the distance, between the trees as if there is an answer written there that will guide him.

He starts crying.

Will places one hand on his shoulder as if to comfort him but it just makes him feel worse.

They'd been almost at Castle Byers, they'd been weaving their way through the forest all day to try and create a convoluted track so that if the monster had somehow of following them, it might get confused. And instead of getting Will to safety, he'd dragged him further out, would have abandoned him if he hadn't been able to keep up because Nancy-

She'd been here. And now she was gone. In his mind, he sees visions of her caught in the monsters claws, bleeding and unconscious. Or dead. Envisions her screaming and running but unable to escape.

“Fuck,” he sobs.

"She might have got away," Will says. "Maybe she was on the other side. Like my mom."

Steve shakes his head. "But you heard her too."

"You've never met my mom, but I know Nancy from before," Will says, although he can't stop the note of doubt in his voice. "Or maybe she's hiding. Like us."

Now that he can't hear her screams, now that he's had moment to let his heart rate to calm, he's thinking more clearly. Surely she would have - she would have screamed *more* if she was injured or attacked. She had sounded scared, not in pain. He thinks. And if the monster had attacked her, surely there would be more signs.

Blood, maybe, or gouges in the trees. Something to indicate a struggle. Or, god forbid, a body.

Besides, this is Nancy Wheeler. There's a reason they take the same classes despite being in different years and it's because she a lot smarter than Steve. If Steve managed to get away from the monster, then Nancy definitely did.

He takes a deep breath and rubs his eyes with the palm of his hand to wipe away tears. He roots around in the pocket of his trousers and pulls out the knife - the one he'd had at the pool, the one that Barb cut herself on - and twists around so he can get to the tree trunk.

"What are you doing?"

"Leaving a message," Steve says. He starts to carve into the bark. He has to start again more than once because the tree is diseased and the bark comes off in larger pieces than he wants, obscuring his message. After a few minutes, he sits back and assesses his work.

Find us. Byers house. -Steve

He stands and brushes bark off his trousers. "If she sees this, she can find us. And we'll be going to your house to try and talk to your mom," he explains. "If she's here - she'll find us."

Will watches him warily. His small frame is hunched in, and his face -

if possible - is even paler than before.

Steve feels guilty again. He wipes at his face - there are still tears leaking from his eyes. He wishes they would just stop but the rush of emotions that assaulted him the moment he heard Nancy's voice have decided this is the only way they can express themselves.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I should haven't - I should have waited. I shouldn't have snapped at you. I should have-"

"Can we just go home?"

"Will-"

"To Castle Byers, I mean." Will looks at his feet. "I'm tired."

Steve nods. "Sure, kid," he says. He stashes the knife in his pocket again and steps forward, then curses. His ankle is on fire. Somehow, he hadn't felt the pain when he'd thought Nancy was in danger, but now it has resurged stronger than before.

Will steps forward silently and grabs Steve's free hand, places it on his own shoulder. "You can lean on me," he says. It feels like a little bit of forgiveness.

They start shuffling forwards like an elderly couple who left their zimmerframes at home. The descent back down the hill that he'd climbed so quickly before takes much longer, with halting steps and frequent cursing.

"Do you hear that?"

Steve stops and listens, Will forced to stop with him. For a second there, he'd thought that-

"I just want to go home."

Will looks at him with wide eyes.

"Let's go. Please."

"That's Nancy," Steve whispers. "Nancy! Nancy, can you hear me!"

Her voice is distant and distorted but it sounds like she's right there and it's just like earlier, with Joyce, but stronger.

"She's on the other side," Will says. He stiffens. "With Jonathon. Jonathon! *Jonathon!*"

And that means she's not dead, she's not injured, she's alive and well and she's not alone.

"Why can't they hear us?" Steve asks.

"I don't know."

They pause for a moment more, but it's silent again. Wherever Nancy and Jonathon were, they're gone now.

"C'mon, kid," Steve says wearily and together they start their shuffle again.

Nancy is not dead and she's not hiding and she's not in this weird, alternate dimension. Steve doesn't know whether to be disappointed to relieved.

...

When Nancy wakes the next morning, Jonathon still at her side, it's to her mom knocking on her bedroom door. She jumps from sleepy to wide awake instantly, leaping out of bed to shove the roll mat and blanket out of the way behind her bed. She looks in the mirror; her skin is still pale, her hair is a mess but most importantly she doesn't look like she spent last night hunting monsters.

She takes a deep breath, steadies herself and then opens the door, slipping outside into the hallway.

"Hey mom," she says.

Her mom looks tired. Her hair is flat and straight, where she

obviously didn't curl it this morning, and she hasn't put make up on yet. "Nancy," she sighs, "the phone."

Nancy shuts her bedroom door behind her, prays that Jonathon doesn't choose now to wake up, and tries to look as innocent as possible. "The phone?"

"Barb's on the phone. Downstairs."

Nancy gapes a little, looks at the hallway clock. It's 6:30. "Right," she says.

"And if you could tell her not to call before the sun rises, we'd appreciate it," her mom says, already walking back to the bedroom.

"Sure..." Nancy tramples down the stairs to the phone, already worried. Why is Barb ringing her so early in the morning when they're going to see each other at school in just a few hours?

"Hello?" she says into the receiver. "Barb?"

"Nancy," Barb says. She sounds relieved, almost like she hadn't expected her to answer the phone. "You're alright."

"I'm fine," Nancy says. "Barb, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Barb laughs. "Nance, you've disappeared. I haven't seen you since we found out that something happened to Steve! You said you were going to go the police and then I didn't hear from you or see you! And then Tommy H and Carol get pulled out of class so that the police can interview them because they think that someone might have *murdered* him? Don't you see why I might have been worried?"

Nancy gapes a little. Thinks back over the last twenty four hours, tries to see it from Barb's point of view and sure, okay, there probably was reason to worry. "Barb, I'm fine," she says. "Yesterday was just crazy, that's all. Really, I'm fine."

Barb huffs. "Are you sure?" she asks, more gently now. "Steve is missing. And Will Byers was found dead the other day. I'd be in pieces right now, if I were you."

“Steve’s alive,” Nancy says instantly.

“What?”

She hesitates. How can she tell Barb that Steve is alive because she heard his voice last night after falling through a tree into a different world without sounding crazy?

“Nancy, how do you know that Steve is alive? Have they found him? Is he okay?”

“No, they haven’t found him.” Nancy twirls the phone cord around her fingers. “Not that I know of, at least. I’ve not seen Hopper since I went to the station yesterday. I just... he has to be alive, right?”

Barb is silent on the other end. Her breath crackling through the line is the only sign that she’s still there.

“Nance, what aren’t you telling me?” she asks.

“Barb, I’m not lying!”

“Then what aren’t you telling me?”

“You wouldn’t believe me,” Nancy says. “Trust me. When I say that yesterday was crazy, it was crazy in a way that no one sane would believe, and even if you did, it’s dangerous.”

“If you’re in danger-”

“I’m fine,” Nancy repeats. “But it might be best if we don’t talk for a couple of days while I-”

“No.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to leave you alone if you’re in danger, Jesus Christ, Nance, I’m coming over!”

The phone clicks off and Nancy is left in silence, phone still in her hand, useless. She opens and shuts her mouth a couple of times,

unsure of what's just happened, before putting the phone back on the hook.

Barb's coming over. To her house. With Jonathon in her bed and a gun in her drawer.

Fuck.

She runs back upstairs to her room, pushes the door open and sees Jonathon sitting up blearily in her bed, hair mussed in a way that almost makes him look cute.

"Nancy," he says, stifling a yawn.

"You need to get up," Nancy says without preamble. "Barb's on her way over."

"Barb?"

"Yeah, she was worried about me and now she's on her way over and you need to get dressed."

Jonathon is too slow to wake up, to realise and by the time he's sat up, rubbing his eyes, there are tires crunching on the driveway. Nancy peers out of her window anxiously, sees Barb's car pulling up. Shit. She only lives two streets over, but that's quick even for her. She frantically picks up Jonathon's clothes and throws them at his chest.

"You don't have to leave, just get dressed and pretend you just got here! Use the bathroom."

The doorbell rings and she runs to answer it. Barb stands outside, clothes rumpled as if she's just thrown them on, her curls out of control and pointing in every direction. Nancy crosses her arms across her chest, aware that she's still in her pyjamas, even if Barb's seen her like this a hundred times before.

"Hey Barb," she says.

"Don't do that," Barb says, and pushes her way into the house. "What's going on, Nancy?"

Nancy looks at her, tries to decide what to do. This is her best friend in the whole world – they’ve been by each other’s sides since pretty much the first day of grade school. Nancy was there for Barb when her nana died; Barb was there for her the first time she kissed a boy. They’ve told each other everything for all of their lives.

She shifts from one foot to the other, feels her shoulder do a strange half shrug and makes up her mind. “Let’s talk in my room,” she says.

They go upstairs, Barb still practically vibrating with questions and concerns. She stops when they enter Nancy’s bedroom and see Jonathon standing awkwardly by the bed. So much for the pretending he just got there plan. He couldn’t look more guilty if he tried.

“*What?!*” Barb exclaims.

Jonathon looks at his feet, like always, all the progress the Nancy made last night lost in a moment. Nancy holds up her hands in placation and tries to defend herself.

“It’s not what you think!”

“He stayed the night?”

“Well, yes, but not like that-”

“What about Steve? I was so worried and it was because you were off with-”

“Barb!”

Nancy sits on her bed. Crosses her legs to try and get more comfy. She pats the bed next to her in an invitation; Jonathon takes it, like he doesn’t know what to do with himself, while Barb stays by the door, angry and confused.

“I’ve found out something about Steve,” she says slowly, trying to figure out how to say this without seeming like she’s gone insane. “But it’s dangerous. If you don’t mind that and you really want to get involved, then I’ll tell you, but if not, it’s best that you leave now.”

Barb looks between the two of them. "Something about Steve," she says. "And Jonathon knows?"

Nancy nods. She's half afraid that Barb is going to turn away now, to leave and stay out of this. The other half of her is afraid that she'll stay.

"Tell me," Barb says.

"Steve's been taken," Nancy says.

"Kidnapped?"

"No." She shakes her head, fiddles with the hemline of her shirt. "A monster took him. I know! I know," she laughs, hysteria in her voice. "I'm not crazy, Barb. Me and Jonathon went into the woods last night to search for him and I saw it. It's this great big monster that has so many teeth, I thought it was going to kill me and-

She takes a deep breath. Tries to feel the warmth of her bedsheets around her, the light seeping into the room from the rising sun. Tries to shake the cold that's she's felt ever since she crawled out of that hole and into Jonathon's arms.

"It took Will as well." She shares a look with Jonathon. "I don't know how or when or where, but it's involved somehow. And we've got proof."

Jonathon reaches into his satchel that's on the floor by her bed and pulls out the photo that started all of this. The one with Steve staring out into the pool, unaware of the monster that's waiting to get him.

Barb takes it, looks at it for a moment. Then she looks back up at them, takes in how serious they are, how anxious.

"You sound crazy," she says.

Nancy swallows, tries not to cry.

"But Nancy, I've known you for pretty much all of my life and you've pretty much never been wrong about anything. Heck, if you told me that the principal was a murderer, I'd believe you. So as crazy as this

seems... I'll be here for you."

Nancy looks up at her, sees the resolution and determination in her friend's face. She sobs. Immediately, Barb stands and pulls her into a hug, her face pressed into her shoulder. She breathes in the familiar scent, already sorry for the snot she knows she's smearing onto her friend's jumper.

"Are you sure?" she asks.

"Nance, maybe you are insane," Barb says, "but I'm not going to let you be insane by yourself."

Nancy chokes a laugh and pulls away, wiping her nose with her sleeve.

"So," Barb says, grasping one of Nancy's hands in her own, comfortingly. "What's the plan?"

...

Castle Byers turns out to be a well made shed, out in the middle of the forest. Or at least, it was probably made well in the real world but in this world, it's in holes and part of the roof has collapsed. It has a sign and a flag and Steve can tell that this place is well loved back home.

"Huh," he says. Will stands next to him, shivering. He's walked for the last half mile, ever since Steve's foot started hurting so much that he couldn't take another step with Will's weight on his back. He's been leaning on the fire pole ever since, as much as he can. "What is this place?"

"Me and Jonathon built it," Will says softly. "After my dad left."

He ducks inside the flap, into the darkness and Steve has no choice to follow. Inside, it looks much the same, just with some pictures pasted to the walls. They're crayon drawings, obviously drawn by Will,

although the paper is damp and musty.

If Steve were smarter, he's sure he could figure out why some things manifest in this world while others don't, but he's not so he can't.

They settle down in the small space. Steve stretches out his injured leg. His ankle is swollen more than he's ever seen it, even after sports injuries, and the cut on his knee from where he fell yesterday is bright red and hot to touch.

Will pulls out the rest of the pasta that Steve gave him and offers it to him. Steve shakes his head.

"You have it," he says. "You've been here longer than me."

Will looks torn between wanting to argue and wanting to devour the entire thing whole. He holds the packet out for just a second longer before tucking into it with ferocity. "Why don't we try your house next?" he asks.

Steve shakes his head. "My parents are away," he says. "No one home."

"Where are they?"

"New York, I think." Steve remembers the night before they left, the yelling and the smashing plates. The note that his mom left on the kitchen counter the next morning. "My dad runs a business, so he needs to go away a lot."

He feels Will watching him and looks away.

"So you and Jonathon built this, huh? You must have a lot of good memories in this place."

"I suppose," Will says. "It took all day to build this. The roof kept collapsing and Jonathon couldn't work out how to tie the knots." He smiles. "The Party meet me here sometimes, when we don't want to play D and D."

"The Party?" Steve asks.

"Dustin, Mike and Lucas. We play Dungeons and Dragons together in a party. So. We call ourselves the party. It's kinda geeky."

"Well sure," Steve says. "But you're allowed to be geeky. You're eleven."

Will shrugs. "We pretend that it's real sometimes. We pretend that we're our characters in real life and we fight each other with wooden swords, or Lucas will bring his survival stuff from when his dad was in 'Nam and we camp."

"That sounds... fun," Steve says. He can't imagine wanting to do that, but this kid seems like he enjoys it and he's smiling thinking about it, the first proper smile that Steve has seen him make.

"Yeah, it is. What about you?" Will looks up at him expectantly, playing with the now empty pasta packet.

"Huh?"

"What do you do with your friends?"

Steve looks at his hands, fiddles with the hemline of his shirt. He's pretty sure that he shouldn't talk about the drugs, the alcohol or the parties, and definitely not the sex. Unexpectedly, he feels a lump in his throat. When he takes those things away, his life seems kind of... hollow.

"I play ball," he says finally. "I'm on the team. That's pretty fun. I guess it's my version of dungeons and dragons, except my party is my team and we're fighting the other schools. I guess I like walking, as well. I like spending time in the woods. It's quiet and no one can tell you what to do. And you can't tell anyone this -" he stares Will dead in the eyes until he giggles, despite himself "-but I enjoy cooking."

"You do?" Will asks. "My brother cooks for us sometimes, but he doesn't like it. He just has to cause my mom is terrible at it."

"Yeah?"

"She once burnt mashed potatoes," Will says.

Steve huffs a laugh. "I'll tell you what, when we get out of here, I'll cook you a proper meal. We'll have roast chicken and bacon and mashed potatoes-

"And stuffing!" Will adds, warming to the theme.

"-and stuffing. The whole works!"

Steve's mouth waters a little just at the thought. He's not eaten anything since the soup. He doesn't know how long ago that was – time seems to lose a lot of meaning here because the day is just as dark as the night – but his stomach has gone past the rumbling stage to giving him stabbing pains.

It doesn't help that there's no clean water here, either. Will showed him how to drain some of the gunk out by using his shirt as a makeshift filter but that doesn't stop the foul taste or the grit that still seeps through.

Every time he's drunk more, his throat has got scratchier and his headache has got worse.

"What's your family like?" Will asks.

"In what way? Like can they cook?"

Will shrugs. "I dunno. Do you spend much time with them?"

Steve shakes his head. "We're a pretty normal family," he says. "My dad works for this big company, pretty high up so he's always travelling, like I said. My mom doesn't have a job so she usually goes with him. When they're home, we watch films and eat together. At Christmas we always go out for dinner."

What he doesn't say is that his parents have been going away more and more, ever since he's been able to drive. That he's pretty sure that one day they're going to leave and never come back. That sometimes, when they are home, he'll go to a party and find someone to go home with just so he doesn't have to see them.

"My dad always wanted me to play baseball."

“So did mine,” Steve says. “I think it’s a dad thing.”

Will’s quiet for a bit and Steve feels like he’s said the wrong thing.

“Did you *want* to play baseball?” he asks.

“Not really,” Will says. “But I wanted him to like me.”

Now that’s a feeling that Steve can understand. He wonders if there’s an alternate universe of him somewhere that told his dad no, and didn’t try out for all the teams. If there’s a him out there who found hobbies he actually wanted to do on his own terms.

“Jonathon said that I should just do what I enjoy. He said that I could be a freak if I wanted, that we’d be freaks together.”

“Your brother sounds like a pretty great guy,” Steve says.

“Yeah.” Will looks to a picture on the wall, one that’s still mostly in one piece. It’s three people hugging; a woman, a teenager and a little boy. In the corner, it says ‘my family’. “He is.”

...

They leave the hardware store with all the supplies they need. A new bat to replace the one Nancy lost, some nails, a bear trap. Lighters, because none of them smoke. Nancy’s honestly a bit worried that the guy selling all of this to them wasn’t worried, but that’s a thought for another day. They load up the car, and it’s then that Nancy hears the giggling.

It’s coming from around the corner and normally she wouldn’t have paid any mind – it’s the middle of Hawkins, after all – but it sounds familiar.

She walks down the street, turns the corner and there she sees Tommy and Carol with cans of spray paint in their hands, laughing as the streak the wall with red. *Nancy Wheeler is a slut.*

She gasps, stumbles back, feels the anger already rising.

“What the hell?” she says.

Tommy stops pretty quickly, freezing when he sees her standing there. Carol barely spares a glance; she continues spraying with a new energy. There’s another girl sat on some crates, watching them, but Nancy doesn’t remember her name, just knows that she’s familiar.

“What the *hell*?” she repeats again, louder.

“Hey Nancy,” Carol coos sweetly, finishing underlining the final word with a flourish. “Came to see your new artwork?”

Nancy strides up to Tommy, her vision going red and jabs a finger into his chest. “You asshole,” she says. “I can’t believe this – what have I done to you?”

She hears Jonathon and Barb as they arrive on the scene, hears Barb’s gasp.

Tommy stutters for a moment before regaining his composure. He bats Nancy’s hand away and gets right back in her face. “You accused me of murder!”

Nancy steps back. “I’m *sorry*?”

“Yeah,” Tommy says, warming to his theme and gaining confidence. “Steve goes away for a few days, I say that maybe he has someone on the side and you take your revenge by going the police and saying that I’m involved in making him disappear?”

“I didn’t do that!”

“Funny,” Carol drawls, coming to stand by her boyfriend, “I guess the chief of police didn’t come in to question us during school, then.”

“I think maybe we should all just calm down,” Barb says, stepping forwards.

“I think maybe you should stay out of it, *dyke*.”

Barb recoils, her face going red. Nancy feels the anger course through her even stronger than before and she's raising her hand to strike Tommy when suddenly, she doesn't need to because he's on the ground and Jonathon is there, fist already going back to his side.

Carol shrieks, bends down to check if Tommy is alright but Tommy shoves her away, already scrambling to his feet.

"You got a new boyfriend, huh?" he asks Nancy, ignoring the others. "Replaced Steve already?"

"Fuck off, Tommy. This is bullshit. Steve is missing and all you care about is that you had to do a police interview? Guess what – so did I."

"Don't let her talk to you like that," Carol says. She's hanging back now, hesitant to come forwards, but there's a glint in her eye that Nancy doesn't like the look of.

"Yeah, you should put them in their place," says the other girl.

"Maybe I will," Tommy mutters. He clenches his fist and then he's coming at Jonathon. They swing their fists at each other and Nancy freezes, not knowing what to do. The two boys fall to the ground, grappling. Nancy didn't know that Jonathon even had this strength in him; when has he gained the muscle to be able to throw Tommy around like this?

Jonathon rolls them over and he's on top, his fist smashing into Tommy's face with a dull thud. Carol shrieks but does nothing. Jonathon swings again, his face full of rage. Nancy's not even sure that he's aware of what he's doing, he looks that out of it.

Something in him has snapped.

Barb shakes herself out of whatever stupor she's in and she grabs Jonathon's arm mid swing with surprising strength, forcing him to stop. It takes a moment but Jonathon turns to look at her. There's blood dripping from his mouth and a scratch above his eye but otherwise he looks fine. Tommy on the other hand... Nancy doesn't know whether to be disgusted or impressed.

“Enough,” Barb says. “Jonathon, that’s enough.”

Tommy scrambles away, a hand covering his face. Carol takes his arm and lets him lean on her, and together, she, him and the other girl shuffle away without another word.

Jonathon stays kneeling on the ground, his chest heaving with exertion. Barb lets go of his arm slowly and he lets it fall to his side.

“Jonathon?” Nancy asks tentatively. She kneels down beside him, not quite touching but almost. “Are you okay?”

“He called you a dyke,” Jonathon says.

“Yes, but you didn’t have to-”

“He called you a dyke,” Jonathon repeats. “Just like he used to call Will a fag.”

Realisation settles in Nancy’s stomach. She understands now. Actually, she wishes that Barb had let Jonathon get a few more punches in.

Still. These people are Steve’s friends and...

‘You know he’s called me a fag behind my back for years’ she remembers Jonathon saying. ‘Lashing out sometimes has meant that my little brother has been bullied for his whole life’.

Is this really the guy she’s dating? Is she even allowed to say that they’re dating any more?

“He’s not the first,” Barb says. “And he won’t be the last.”

Nancy has always admired her strength. Barb hasn’t always taken the insults and criticism with such poise, but then she’s had the practice. When they were younger, she dealt with it with tears and self hate. She’d been the tallest in their year since they were about six years old. And she’d never been the thinnest, prettiest girl, even if Nancy thought that any one would be lucky to have her. But time and cruel words teach lessons and these days, Barb let them wash over her without taking heed. Nancy wished she was able to do the same, but

she'd always craved being liked more than she'd craved being strong.

"Besides," Barb says, her voice wobbling. "It shouldn't hurt if it's true."

The world stops for a moment. Nancy covers her mouth, looking between Barb and Jonathon. Jonathon's pale, has been since he first seemed to realise what he's done, but he looks up at Barb with something like awe.

"You mean..."

"It's true." Barb raises her head high, refuses to be afraid.

Fearless.

"I won't let someone tear me down for who I am."

Jonathon swallows, looks down at the ground. "Will, uh... he was. You know. I never knew how to tell him it was okay. Our – our dad didn't like it and – he's gone now but Will never..." He runs a hand through his hair. "I wish he'd met you."

Barb kneels down beside the two of them and grasps him in a hug. Her head fits over Jonathon's shoulder and her gaze meets Nancy. There are tears in her eyes.

"Me too," she says. "No one should ever feel alone."

And that's when the police officer rounds the corner, sees the three of them and raises the radio to his mouth. "Found them," he says and Nancy knows that shit is about to go down.

7. the other side

Notes for the Chapter:

It's been a minute since I last posted - life's been crazy. I haven't forgotten this, though. Let me know if you enjoy it!

Counting the days
To meet you on the other side
I will always be
Waiting
Until the day that I see you
On the other side
Come and take me home

- The Other Side / Evanescence

Hopper follows Joyce into his own police station, wisely staying away from her cold anger. She's been silent the whole ride over since Flo radioed over that Jonathon Byers had been arrested for assault, furiously tapping her knee with one hand. She's a woman on a mission and Hopper feels trapped in her forcefield.

She enters the main office a few steps ahead of him and has already spotted Jonathon by the time Hopper gets there. "Jonathon? Jesus... what happened?"

Hopper takes in the room. There are three teenagers sat at Callahan's desk; Callahan himself is sat nearby, looking fed up. Jonathon is hunched over, looking just as run down as his mother, and is holding tissues stained with blood. There's a girl sat next to him – Nancy Wheeler – who looks exhausted, and on other side sits someone he doesn't know. A tall girl with auburn curls and glasses who is watching everything with guarded interest.

Callahan stands to intervene. “Ma’am,” he starts in the long-suffering tone of voice that he’s probably picked up from Hopper.

“I’m fine,” Jonathon mutters and Joyce turns.

“Why is he wearing handcuffs?” she demands.

“Well, your boy assaulted a police officer. That’s why.”

“Take them off!”

“I am afraid I cannot do that.”

“Take them off!”

Hopper sighs. “You heard her,” he says to Callahan. “Take ‘em off.”

“Chief, I get everyone’s emotional here but there’s something you need to see,” Powell says.

Hopper groans internally because Powell is the sensible one who actually cares about his job. If he says there’s something he needs to see, there’s probably something he needs to see which doesn’t sound so good for the Byer’s boy.

“Fine,” he says. “Joyce, just – wait here a minute.”

He lets Powell and Callahan lead him out of the station and into the car park. They lead him to a battered car that’s clearly seen better days and Powell gestures for him to open it. He does.

“Mother fucker,” he says.

There’s a cardboard box filled full of lighter fluid, nails and a bear trap. Resting on top is a small XX calibre handgun. If he’d seen this in a murderer’s trunk back in the city, he probably wouldn’t have batted an eyelid. In Jonathon Byer’s trunk, however...

He swears again. He’s finally been getting somewhere in this case, finally realised that Joyce isn’t completely crazy and yet if he’d found this 24 hours ago, he would have solved the disappearance of Will Byers as a fratricide.

Without another word, he picks up the box, storms into the station and lets it fall onto the desk with a loud crash. Nancy flinches. Jonathon hides his face. The other girl chews her lip anxiously.

“What is this?” Joyce starts to rummage through the box immediately.

“Why don’t you ask your son?” Hopper asks. “We found it in his car.”

“What?”

Jonathon leans forward immediately, defensiveness overcoming his shyness. “Why were you going through my car?”

“Is that really the question you should be asking right now?” Hopper leans forwards, placing his hands on the table so he can get nice and low and look the kid in the eye. “I want to see you in my office.”

“You won’t believe me.”

Hopper hesitates, then slowly turns back and leans back in again. He wonders how a mother and son can be so different but so damn similar at the same time. “Why don’t you give me a try,” he says.

...

Steve is struggling.

The longer he’s spent in this place, the worse he’s felt. The water - if he can even call it that - has only been making him sicker. Food has been scarce to non-existent. And the cold...

It’s strange because, on the surface, it doesn’t feel cold. There’s no wind or breeze, no ice, but he feels it in his core. Like on a cold day where the cold seeps into your bones and the only way to get rid of it is to sit for hours by a fire, with a hot drink. Except, here, there are no fires and no drinks. Even moving doesn’t make him feel warmer, just - more alive. Somehow. Maybe.

He's been shivering for the last hour and Will has silently tucked himself into his side, sharing body heat as much as possible. He looks awful as well, just as sweaty and pale as when Steve first saw him, but most importantly, he doesn't seem worse.

"Why'd you say you weren't a fag?"

The question comes out of the blue. They haven't spoken in fuck knows how long, in the aftermath of whatever happened out there. Steve would think that maybe he'd dreamt it, or hallucinated it, but the bat is leaning in the corner as a stark reminder that someone else, Nancy, had been here.

"Before. When you said we should share body heat, you said you weren't a fag."

Steve runs a hand through his hair. It's greasy and limp. A few days ago, that would have been his worst nightmare. "I just... I didn't want you to think that I was going to molest you," he says awkwardly. "You know. Older guy. Alone with a young boy. Getting close."

"But why would it matter if you were gay?"

"What?"

Will still doesn't look up, speaking to his knees. "Just because someone is gay doesn't mean that they would... molest you."

"I know," Steve says defensively. "But... AIDs."

Will does move away now. Steve can see he's said something wrong but he's not entirely sure what. It's not exactly like he's saying anything controversial. Gay people have a reputation and he'd only wanted to make the kid feel as safe as possible. Besides, it's not like he's as bad as his dad – the guy insists on making rude comments with every news cycle.

"Not every gay person has AIDs, Steve. And even if they did--"

"I don't know!" Steve lets his gaze wander around the hut in exasperation. "I don't know, kid. I just wanted you to feel safe."

Will doesn't say anything for a little bit. Steve draws his own knees up to his chest as he waits for him to speak. The cold has seeped into every part of his body and he just wants to conserve as much body heat as possible.

"Do you think we're going to get out of here?" Will asks.

"Christ," Steve says.

"Honestly. Do you think we will?"

"I-" Steve looks at his knees. "I hope so. Your family seems pretty smart, kid. I think they'll find you."

"But they might not."

"Will-"

"If someone you knew was gay, would you hate them?"

Steve takes a deep breath. He's getting emotional whiplash from this conversation. It feels like being tested for a class he didn't know he was taking. He looks at Will more closely; his shoulders are tense and he's so still, it looks like he's been frozen in place. He realises that whatever he says next, this kid is going to remember it for the rest of his life.

Steve closes his eyes briefly and imagines Jonathon, standing by his locker, looking over at him accusingly. He wishes he knew what Jonathon would say, but he's aware that the longer he waits, the worse the silence feels and besides, he didn't even know Jonathon to begin with.

"No," he says, finally. "I wouldn't hate them." He tries to gather his thoughts. "I'd be worried, I guess. That maybe they'd be checking me out in the locker room. That they might have a disease."

"What if... you could guarantee that neither of those things would happen?" Will says, voice small and trembling.

"And it's someone I care about?"

Will nods, an almost imperceptible movement. “Your best friend.”

Steve tries to imagine Tommy taking him to the side at a party, looking serious. Telling him that he was gay – that he and Carol have never been in love, that he’s been afraid to say anything for years and can they still be friends?

“I guess I, uh, wouldn’t know what to do without them. Sure, I wouldn’t know what to think. Not really. But I think I could get used to it.” Steve thinks a little more. “I guess I’d be worried about them. My dad... he’s a big believer in conversion camps. I don’t think I’d want my friend to go through that.”

He looks over to Will. The kid has his forehead bent to his knees and his shoulders are shaking. “What if,” he says, voice muffled and shaking, “what if- if-“

Steve stays silent, doesn’t know what to do apart from to let the kid speak.

“What if I was gay,” Will says finally in one big breath.

Fuck. Steve runs a hand through his hair. Will looks up at him, holding his gaze. He’s a mess; tears are running down his cheeks and through the dirt smeared on his face. He’s heaving big breaths that rasp against his throat like there’s not enough air and Steve doesn’t know what to do-

He’s not qualified for this conversation, he’s not the kid’s family or his friend, Christ, he can barely deal with his own feelings-

“Christ,” Steve says out loud and then grabs the kid and pulls him into a hug. Will’s hands curl into his shirt, pulling on it tightly, and his tears soak through his shirt immediately. “It’s okay,” he says, holding him tightly. “It’s okay.”

Will sobs even harder, his jaw jamming awkwardly into a rib.

“I just-“ he says, “Jonathon – my dad – I don’t want-“

It’s like there’s a massive weight on the kid’s chest that has just been taken off; one that has been crushing him and holding him down and

now he can breathe for the first time in a long while. The words keep coming out of him but not in complete sentences and Steve gives up on trying to understand them.

Hesitantly, he starts rubbing Will's back in what he thinks is a soothing manner, hoping that he's doing this right.

It takes a while, but eventually, Will starts to calm down and he starts to wipe his nose with sleeve.

"Will," Steve says gently. "It's okay. I don't know anything about this kind of thing but I guess people can't choose who they like. I mean, I definitely didn't want to like Lisa in tenth grade cause she scared me and her boyfriend scared me and I knew it wasn't going to end well, and boy it did not. But, like, maybe we just like who we like and maybe that's okay." He hesitates. "Does your family know?"

Will shakes his head, still snivelling a little. "My dad is pretty homophobic," he says.

"Why – why did you tell me?" Steve asks.

Will shrugs. "I guess I didn't want to die without ever having told anyone."

The words sink in the air around them and Steve lets his head fall back against the wall with a heavy thud. "Fuck," he breathes. "Jesus fucking Christ."

Because if this smart, intelligent and brainy kid thinks that they're going to die here... well, they probably are.

...

Hopper's office is messier than the last time she was here. That's the first thing Nancy notices as she sits down, Jonathon and Barb on either side. It's not important, not really, but her mind is running in circles trying to distract herself. If Hopper decides to convict

Jonathon for assault and possession of weapons when she was the one who paid for them...

"There's a monster in Hawkins," she says when Hopper looks at them all expectantly. "It's what took Will and Steve. I know it sounds crazy, but I saw it and we even have photographic proof – Jonathon –" she prompts to get him to find the photo, "-and it's been killing animals in the forest."

Jonathon hands the photo of Steve over. She's stared at it so many times now that she could probably draw it from memory. Hopper takes it and scans it, his face unreadable, eyes dark and stormy.

"That could be distortion," he says.

"It's not! I saw it!" Nancy takes a deep breath. She needs Hopper and Joyce to know that she's telling the truth. Barb takes her hand and squeezes comfortingly. "I don't know how to explain it, but there's some kind of doorway in the woods, I crawled through it and I saw it, I saw the thing that took Will."

Joyce takes a short intake of breath, eyes wide. "You saw it?"

"It's some kind of- monster," Nancy says, making direct eye contact with Joyce, then Hopper. "It was tall, kind of like a human but it had no face, it's like a twisted hybrid of a venus fly trap but with more teeth. It took Will and then it took Steve."

"And the gun?" Hopper asks. "The bear trap?"

"We were going to kill it," Jonathon says. He sounds defiant; when Nancy glances over, he has his head held high and he's glaring at Hopper, daring him to try and stop them. "It killed my brother and I need to stop it before it kills anyone else."

"Will's not dead," Joyce says.

"Mom, you can't keep--"

"It's true."

Barb, Nancy and Jonathon look to Hopper as one. "I'm sorry?" Nancy

asks.

Hopper stands up, stubs his cigarette on the ashtray and lights another. Then he pulls out a second and hands it to Joyce who takes it with a shaking hand.

“Hop,” she says, “what are you saying?”

Hopper runs a hand through his hair, over his face, ash flying from his cigarette. “I went to the morgue,” he says finally. “I don’t know what you buried. But it was not your son.”

“You-“ Joyce cuts herself off, bites her lip with the force of someone trying to stop themselves from speaking. “You went to the morgue?” she whispers.

Hopper grasps her shoulders, looks her in the eye with an intensity that Nancy has never seen in anyone before. That’s Hopper, though. Everything about him says ‘dark and serious’. His words are always measured, said with weight. His eyes don’t wander, he always gives his full attention. “You were right. All along.”

“But the lights... the wall...”

“Will is alive?!” Jonathon says, voice rising and half standing before Nancy places a hand on his arm to keep him still.

“I don’t know.” Hopper shakes his head. Takes a long drag and sighs a cloud of smoke. “Maybe. At the very least, that was not his body.”

Jonathon takes a shaky breath, collapses back into the chair, face pale. His eyes are wide, glistening with tears.

“I went to the Harrington house –“ here, Hopper shoots a look at Nancy and Barb, “and the electricity went haywire. The answering machine started playing. Now... I don’t know what happened. But it was a kid, he said he was lost, asked for Carol and Tommy.”

“Steve,” Nancy breathes.

Hopper paces from one end of the office to the other, brows furrowed. Nancy squeezes Barb’s hand again and let’s go, glad for the

comfort but needing some space to think. Jonathon had said that Joyce heard Will's voice several times through the phone line, and now Steve has possibly managed to also make a connection through the same way. Maybe there's some kind of link through electricity, but that doesn't explain the tunnel in the tree, or why-

She can hear a commotion out in the hallway that stops her train of thought right in its tracks. A woman's voice, and a man's, arguing about something. Hopper must hear something as well because he stops pacing, turning to look out of the door before deciding to ignore it. He stops in front of them and glares at each of them in turn.

Nancy shrinks in her chair slightly. She's never been in trouble before. She's also never crawled into a different world through a tree before, either, or shot a gun, so maybe this a time for firsts. Still, she doesn't like the feeling.

"Now," Hopper begins. "None of this gets you out of trouble. I don't know what you were thinking trying to go after this thing alone, but you all need to go home." His voice is heavy and commanding. "I'm confiscating these weapons. I appreciate that you're trying to save your family and your friend, but this is how – you – get – hurt."

Something slams elsewhere in the building and Nancy jumps, nerves on end. Hopper barely spares the noise a glance.

"We are doing the best we can to bring these boys home safe, but I can't do that if I'm having to spend my time worrying about you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Barb mutters.

"Good. Now, I'm going to call your-"

"I want an apology!"

The shout comes from the lobby, loud enough that Nancy can almost hear the spit between each word. They all look towards the door, Hopper glowering.

"Stay here," Hopper says. He strides out of the room and down the corridor, Joyce hot on his heels. Nancy shares a look with Jonathon

and Barb; then they follow.

They walk into the main office and find Powell and Callaghan trying to placate a woman who is gesturing wildly, everything about her figure angry and volatile. Beside her is a small boy, his arm in a cast and his face set in a scowl. The cast is new, Nancy notes; there are no messages or signatures defacing it, yet. In fact, she realises as he turns slightly, allowing her to see his face properly, it's a kid who goes to the same school as Mike. She's seen them talking sometimes when she's been picking him up from school.

"Where's the chief? I want to speak to him!"

"Ma'am, I need you to calm down," Callaghan says with exaggerated care, his hands waving with emphasis.

"What is your name, deputy?" the woman hisses.

Callaghan quirks a half smile and says "Well, I'm an officer." He breathes a chuckle. "Is that okay?"

"Name and badge number," the woman demands. "Both of you, now."

Nancy raises her eyebrow, already annoyed on behalf of the officers. Beside her, Barb looks incredulous and Jonathon... well, he looks like he's still in shock. Nancy reaches out for his arm, trying to comfort him somehow but he doesn't seem to feel it, so she finds his hand instead and clasps it. His only response is to shuffle slightly closer.

"What the hell is going on here?" Hopper shouts as he strides forward. The woman instantly quiets, the officers parting to make way for him.

"Chief--"

"These men are humiliating my son--"

"No, no, no," Callaghan says quickly, "Okay, that's not true."

"Yes--"

"There was some kind of fight, chief," Powell says, cutting in on the others.

The woman scoffs, the boy next to her watching them all like it's a tennis match. "A psychotic child broke his arm!"

Callaghan leans forward. "A little girl, chief," he says, gesturing at hip height to indicate how small he's talking. "A little one."

"That tone," the woman gasps, "do you hear that tone?"

"Honestly, I'm just trying to state a fact."

Hopper raises a hand that silences them both. "I don't have time for this." He raises his hands in the air. "Will you please get a statement and *get her out* ." He mouths the last part, already turning on his heel.

Nancy quickly steps out of the way, pulling Jonathon and Barb with her. She can see the exasperation in his face and it's only now that she thinks that they should have been leaving while all of this was happening. She's pretty sure that Hopper was about to tell them that he was going to ring her parents and her mom is not going to be pleased to find out she's almost been arrested. They should have been leaving in raucous and then-

Hopper stops, turns on his heel. "What did you just say?"

"I said she's a freak," says the boy who had been starting to give his statement.

"No, her hair," Hopper says urgently. "What'd you say about her hair?"

"Her head's shaved. She doesn't even look like a girl. And..." he hesitates, looks down to the ground, looks to his mom who tells him to go on. "She can... do things."

"What kind of things?"

"Like... make you fly... And piss yourself."

"What?" Powell asks in disbelief, smirking.

Hopper silences him with a raised hand. Nancy suddenly realises that this isn't just about this boy losing a fight. Hopper would never be so tense, so focused if this wasn't somehow related to whatever is happening in Hawkins.

"Was she alone?" he asks.

The boy shakes his head, anger rising again. "She always hangs out with those losers," he spits.

"Losers? What losers?"

"Will Byers," the boy says and Nancy feels her stomach drop. "Dustin Henderson. Lucas Sinclair. And Mike Wheeler."

She stumbles back, feels the wall against her back, feels Jonathon's hand clench hers even harder. Barb puts a hand on her shoulder.

"Nance-" she says.

"Joyce!" Hopper yells. He's striding towards them, holding at a hand for his hat which appears in his hand as if by magic, Flo already having anticipated his movements.

"Chief?" Powell calls after him. "Do you need back up? Chief?"

Hopper barely spares them a glance as he powers past them, Joyce already falling into step. "You lot. With me," he says.

"Hop, d'you think?" Joyce asks.

"I don't know," Hopper says grimly, yanking the door to his truck open and gesturing impatiently for the rest of them to slide in.

"What's going on?" Nancy asks.

"Who is this girl?" asks Barb.

"What's she got to do with Will?" asks Jonathon.

"Shut up!" Hopper flicks his cigarette butt out of the window, turns the engine on and pulls out of the driveway. "Wheeler, where's your

brother?”

Nancy shakes her head, looks desperately at Barb. “I don’t know!” She taps her leg, looks around the car as she tries to think. “At home, maybe,” she says and Hopper takes a sharp right turn that makes them all fall to the left, towards her house. “Mom’s been really strict since Will disappeared.”

“Who’s the girl?” Barb asks again.

Hopper doesn’t answer but Joyce turns in her seat to look at them. Her hair falls in her face, hiding her expression. “There’s a girl that was kidnapped,” she says. “Years ago. Her mother tried to get police interest in it, but it was covered up by the government.”

“She might not exist,” Hopper mutters.

“She’s involved in all of this. Somehow. She was taken, just like Will, like my little boy.”

Jonathon leans forwards and places a hand on her shoulder. She reaches up to grasp it.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “For not believing you.”

Nancy’s thrown against the seat in front of her as Hopper slams the breaks. Beside her, Barb falls into the gap between the seats. Joyce gasps in pain as her shoulder is wrenched, her hand still clasped in Jonathon’s.

“What the fuck, Hop?” she asks.

He doesn’t say a word, just lets them look and see for themselves. Nancy feels her stomach drop.

They’re in the entrance to the cul de sac that her house is in; they’re looking over towards the driveway. Several vans are parked around the place, on the road, in the drive, men bustling to and from the house in fancy suits. They’re carrying things, things from her house, in clear bags as if they have some kind of importance.

She fumbles at the car door, falls out into the road and barely notices

Hopper join her at her side as she stares over in shock. He presses something plastic into her hand. Binoculars. Numbly, she lifts them and adjusts them so she can see more clearly.

Her dad is in the driveway, watching passively as these people empty their house of their positions.

She barely notices taking a step forward, the only thought in her head is that she needs to do something, needs to stop whatever this is from happening.

Hopper stops her, his hand on her shoulder preventing her from moving any further. "You can't go back," he says.

"That's my family," she says.

"I know." Hopper doesn't remove his hand, just looks her in the eye and absently, she wonders if this was how Joyce felt earlier when he did it to her. "But those people? They're not good. And they're looking for a girl that was last seen with your brother. Do you understand me?"

Nancy swallows. "They're looking for Mike."

"And we need to find him first."

"The radios," she says and Hopper frowns in confusion. "They all have – Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Will – they have a radio each. It's how they talk to each other, so they don't have to use the phone. If they're together, at least one of them will have a radio on them."

Nancy turns back to the house, blinks away tears. "But if I can't go in..."

If she listens carefully, she can hear the buzz of voices in the distances. Wonders what they're saying. Tries not to think about what they're going to do with her brother if they find him.

"Will has one of these radios?"

Nancy snaps round to look at him. "Yes," she breathes.

“Then we’ve got our way in.”

Hopper smiles grimly, tugs his hat down lower on his head and climbs back into the truck. Nancy hesitates. Finally, finally, things are starting to come together. She’s got more questions than ever and suddenly everything is seeming more real, more terrifying because this isn’t just a monster, somehow there are real people, the government is involved. But people are listening to her. She’s making a difference.

And not only is she somehow going to find Steve – she’s going to save her brother.

She gets in the car.

8. when the darkness comes

And it burns like a fire.
And there's a voice inside my head,
and it's telling me to be brave.
When the darkness comes

- When The Darkness Comes / Shelby Merry

It's several hours later that Steve is woken up by Will shaking his shoulder. He doesn't really remember falling asleep and it takes a moment for him to gather his bearings, his mind taking longer than it should to catch up to gear.

"Steve," Will hisses, his face millimetres from his own. "Steve, wake up!"

"Wha' issit?" he mumbles, voice raspy and throat sore. He sits up slowly, body not moving as quickly as he'd like.

"It's back."

That wakes him up. Adrenaline surges through him and suddenly his body is working properly again, energy coursing through his veins. He reaches for the bat with one hand while the other pushes Will gently out of the way. "Where?"

"I don't know. I could hear it. It's coming for us." Will's voice catches and he sounds so fucking terrified, so scared.

Steve peeks out of the flap that covers the hut entrance, trying to see anything in the tree line. There's nothing there that he can see but he doesn't let his guard down. He hadn't seen anything by the pool either.

He lets the flap fall, looks back towards Will. "You got any other hiding spots?"

Will shakes his head. "T-this was the l-last one."

Fuck.

Has he got any hiding places of his own? There must be somewhere they can go, but his brain isn't working properly and the only place he can think of is the men's locker room in the school where he had first hidden out. There's food there at least, but there has to be somewhere else, somewhere closer, somewhere safer.

Something growls.

It's close, so close that Steve jolts backwards, lifting the bat reflexively, heart pounding against his rib cage like it's trying to escape his body. Will whimpers.

"Okay," Steve says quietly. "We're going to make a run for it."

"W-where to?" Will asks. His voice is weak, terror making it tremble and to be honest, Steve doesn't know if the kid has the strength to run that far.

Hell, he's not sure if he does.

"I went to the high school when I first got here," Steve says. His voice is too loud. The monster is going to hear him, it's waiting right outside their little hut for the right moment. "I put some food in the men's locker room. Nothing came close to me when I was there. I'm going to go out first, and then we're going to run. You need to follow me."

Will nods. Tears are tracking silently down his face.

"Okay but first." Steve reaches into his pocket and pulls out the knife that he's carried with him this whole time. The metal is cool in his hands and he passes it to Will. "Take this. You need something to defend yourself."

The 'if we get separated' gets left unsaid, but it hangs in the air anyway.

Steve takes a deep breath, closes his eyes and readjusts his grip on

the bat. “You ready?” he asks.

“Ready,” Will whispers.

Steve pushes the flap aside, stands in the open for the first time in so long that the muscles in his legs scream at him and he barely has time to appreciate it because something slams into his side.

Fucking shitballs, he was right, he was so fucking right, it was out there waiting for them this entire time. He yells as the force knocks him to the ground. Will darts out of the hut, knife in his hand with the blade open and the little fucker stabs at the monster’s leg.

It roars and makes a clumsy swipe but Will ducks out of the way just in time.

Steve climbs to his feet, swings the bat and feels the *crunch* as the nails sink into its leathery skin, hears blood squirt over the rushing blood in his ears and feels the suction as he tries to pull it back out. The monster stumbles slightly and he pulls the bat free, pulls it back for the extra momentum and swings again.

The monster stumbles again but recovers more quickly this time and swipes its claws at Steve’s face. He screams as it rips along his cheek, burning pain in his jaw.

“Steve!”

Will tries to stab with the knife again and the monster changes focus, opening its face flaps and exposing rows of teeth to him.

“Will, run!”

Steve swings again, misses and Will barely dodges out of the way in time as the monster lowers its fucking mouth trap to try and- what? Bite him?

Will doesn’t respond, doesn’t move away, just tries and swipes again with the knife, David against the Goliath. Steve roars, tries to gain the thing’s attention again and smashes a direct hit on its back. While it’s recovering, he grasps Will by the shoulders and forcefully pushes him away.

“Run,” he yells again, already turning to swing again. It’s on the back foot – it’s bleeding sluggishly, peppered with tiny holes where the nails have broken flesh - but so is he. This time when he swings, it raises an arm to block him, stopping him from making a hit. It punches him in the stomach with its other hand – claw – thing - and *punctures* him.

The air is knocked out of him. His mouth falls open to try and scream but there’s no sound. It lifts him from the ground by his stomach and something inside of him *rips* . It hurts so much, he didn’t think anything could hurt this much but it does and it’s getting worse, it shouldn’t be able to, this should be the most pain anyone should be capable of feeling but it *does* .

The fire spreads through him, radiating out from the fucking claw in his stomach, so much pain that can barely think. He’s vaguely aware that he’s kicking his feet, trying to cause damage, to get this thing to fucking let him go, hears the bat fall to the floor.

He opens his eyes, barely aware of having closed them in the first place and sees Will frozen, staring up at him from behind the monster.

“Run,” he whispers, pleading, desperate. He’s tried so hard; he needs this kid to survive. He can’t fail now. There’s a family waiting for him, a loving brother and mother. He’s got so much of life left to live, if only he can get out of this place alive.

Will stares at him, whole body trembling but still not moving.

The monster pauses, turning its head to see what Steve is looking at. It sees Will, sees him still standing there like an idiot, and it throws Steve to the ground. He hits it hard, his head rebounding off a rock that makes him see stars, claws sliding out of his stomach like a knife in butter. He’s able to breathe again and he screams, unable to stop, a primal response that his brain can’t override.

It staggers towards Will who finally has the sense to get out of the fucking way, stumbling backwards before he turns his back and starts running but it’s not enough, it’s not fucking enough because the monster swipes again. Will goes sprawling to the ground.

The monster carries on towards him, falls onto all fours and lowers its head like it's a dog at feeding time. Will screams, high pitched and terrified, legs scrambling to get purchase on the forest floor.

Steve sobs. The pain is so bad, he can barely move, barely think but he has to protect this kid. He made a promise. He reaches out with his hand, tries to find the bat. Every movement pulls the skin on his stomach and it almost feels like he's ripping it further. He screams again, yells into the dirt as he tries to power through. His fingers close on wood; he yells and lifts and throws.

It's a stick, not the bat. The movement of throwing it distorts his shoulder, side, everything and the pain makes everything white-out for a moment. The stick is the wrong weight, his aim is off and it goes nowhere fucking near the monster.

It's so painful. Steve's face is wet but he has no idea if its tears, blood, mud or all three.

The monster doesn't even glance his way. It leans down close to Will who's stopped moving and spits something onto his face.

"Steve," Will sobs.

Something howls in the distance. It's piercing sound cuts through the air, deep and loud. Steve wouldn't pay it any mind – he's already fucked, he's already going to be eaten alive by this demonic reptilian human crossbreed – but the monster stops moving.

It cocks its head, listening.

Will starts scrabbling again, starts crawling away, but he's moving slowly like he's been injured too. That's enough for the monster to come back to and it stands, reaches forward with one arm and grabs his leg.

Steve tries to move, tries to do something, anything, but the pain is too much. His body is too weak. He sobs, fingers digging into the mud.

Will screams, twists and tries to shake free, tries to grab onto the ground to stop himself from being pulled away but his movements

are even slower now, sluggish. The monster is coming back towards Steve. It hesitates by him and Steve prepares himself for more pain, to be grabbed just like Will but instead, it ignores him and carries on walking away, like he's not even worth the effort.

Will is almost still. His face is getting laxer by the moment, his eyelids lowering with every step the monster takes. Despite it, he calls Steve's name faintly and reaches his hand out towards him. Steve uses every ounce of energy he has left to try and reach back. He manages to get his arm off the ground; their fingertips brush and he tries to hold on, tries to anchor Will with him so he can't be taken away, so he can hold true to his promise, but his body betrays him.

Will's fingers slip away and so does the rest of him. Steve yells and sobs.

"Will," he says, voice too frail even to his own ears. "Come back. Take me."

The monster moves out of his field of vision and he's too weak to even turn his head. Too weak to even listen to it as it pushes through the undergrowth.

"Take me," he sobs to the empty forest. "Not him. Take me."

He'd given himself one job in this place. And he's failed.

...

Somehow, Nancy ends up breaking into Hawkins Middle School with her idiot of a brother, his gaggle of friends, his mother, her friends and the chief of police in the middle of the night to make a sensory deprivation tank based on the instructions of her old science teacher.

If anyone had asked her back in July how she thought the beginning of her sophomore year was going to go, she would never have guessed this.

She's glad her brother is safe – of course she is – but there's a part of her that's annoyed that he's brought this shit down on their heads.

Apparently, based on what he and the others had stuttered out on their way over, he's been hiding a telekinetic runaway in their basement and now there are government agents looking for them.

And somehow, this all ties in with Steve's disappearance.

'The Upside Down' they'd called it. A mirror world, that's similar to theirs but not, that can only be accessed through a gate or a rip between the worlds. It sounds ridiculous but she knows it's true. How could she not, when she's literally crawled through to the other side?

She watches as El is prepped for the tank, as they give her goggles and swimming costume, check the temperature and buoyancy of the water again.

"Is this really going to work?" she asks Barb.

Barb shrugs. "It's only as crazy as everything else. What's to say it won't work?" She looks down at the ground and then back at Nancy. "Joyce said she's been at the lab since she was born. For twelve years."

"I can't imagine," Nancy says, shaking her head.

"And to think that she managed to escape – and find us. She could do anything she wanted, you know. She has the power to get whatever she wants. But she chose to stay and help us. That's rather incredible, don't you think?"

"You see the best in everyone."

"How can I not?" Barb asks. "Look at Joyce. She's been so determined and strong ever since Will disappeared. Not all parents would do that. I overheard Flo talking to one of the officers at the station, they haven't even been able to get in contact with Steve's parents yet. And then, look at you. It would have been so easy for you to stand to the side when Steve went missing, but you didn't. You looked for him – Hopper might never have believed Joyce if you hadn't found that photo from Jonathon. And he might never have looked at if you hadn't asked. And besides," Barb squeezes Nancy's shoulder. "If it had been me that disappeared that night, instead of Steve, I know

you would have done exactly the same for me.”

Nancy blinks away tears. She hadn’t thought about it that way.

“Hey,” says a new voice and she looks up to see Jonathon standing next to her, his eyes rimmed with red and face pale with anxiety. She reaches for his hand blindly and something in her stomach settles when he grasps it and squeezes. “They’re starting,” he says.

El is standing in water, Joyce and Hopper overseeing with stern faces while the kids are scattered around. Mike is sullen and angry like he has been since Will first disappeared, but there’s something soft in his eyes as he looks at El.

Slowly, El lowers herself down into the water and Joyce lets go of her hand, letting her drift. Dustin clicks the radio on and static fills the air.

For a while, nothing happens. Nancy is overly aware of her breath, of the blood rushing through her veins. Dustin sniffs loudly and Lucas elbows him.

Then, El jerks suddenly and she reaches forward with one hand. “Will,” she says softly.

Joyce makes a sound – a sob, a cry, an inarticulate noise. Jonathon’s hand in Nancy’s suddenly takes on a death grip but she doesn’t dare say anything, just bears it.

“Will,” El says again. There’s a note of panic in her voice.

“Is he alive?” Joyce asks, kneeling by the pool. “My boy, is he okay?”

“Alive,” El breathes. “Sleeping.”

Hopper’s hand rests heavily on Joyce’s shoulder. Nancy can’t tell if it’s to comfort her or to stop her from doing something rash. “What about Steve?” he asks.

El’s face goes slack again. Whatever she’s doing in her mind, it’s taking all her concentration. It’s still hard to believe that she’s actually doing anything – the kids have told them about her powers,

but she still hasn't seen them for herself.

Water splashes and hits the floor with a wet slap. El goes rigid, her jaw clenched. She doesn't say anything for a moment, and then she whispers, "Steve."

Nancy surges forward, dragging Jonathon through their linked hands as she comes to stand at Joyce's shoulder.

"Steve? Is he okay?"

"Steve Harrington?" El asks again, but her voice is smaller than it was before.

Then she's screaming, thrashing in the water, her face screwing up in fear. Joyce grabs onto her shoulders, soothing placations falling from her mouth and Nancy falls to her knees next to them.

"Sssh," Joyce says, "it's okay, you're in Hawkins, you're okay."

El's eyes snap open and she curls into a ball, clutching onto Joyce like a lifeline. "Steve," she gasps, "hurt."

"Steve's hurt?" Nancy asks.

"Blood."

She looks to Hopper. She doesn't know why. Guidance, maybe. Comfort. He's an adult. He's supposed to be able to tell her that everything is going to be okay.

He doesn't. Instead, Hopper crouches down next to El, face serious and asks, "Where is he hurt?"

A tear slips down El's cheek.

"Everywhere," she says.

...

The thing is, Steve wasn't a bad person. He isn't.

Except that he is.

He's known for a while, really – jokes with Tommy have gotten crueler over the years, he's started forgetting that the girls he sleeps with have feelings, he's become harder and more brittle in a way that only acknowledges at three in the morning when he's staring at himself in the mirror. The only thing is that he's known but he hasn't wanted to do anything about it.

The world is cruel. To survive, you have to toughen up, you have to shit on others or be shit on. And Steve, he's been shit on enough times to know when to stop it before it happens. He's got a life plan – finish high school, get the hell out, work for his dad's company and then who knows, maybe he'll be the one travelling the country to leave his parents instead of the other way around.

But.

There's more to life too. He's been reminded of that recently. Nancy Wheeler is smart, beautiful and she isn't jaded. She has aspirations in life, a plan that doesn't revolve around proving others wrong. Looking after Will, too, has reminded him of childhood innocence and mischievous and a whole host of things he's not felt since he was a small boy.

God. He'd really thought that he'd be able to look after him, somehow bring him back to his mother and brother. People like Will are needed in the world. People like Will could change the world.

Instead, Will's gone and Steve is the one still here.

He's lying in the dirt where the monster left him. Shivers keep wracking his body, though he can't really feel them, and he can barely see out of one eye for the sticky mess that covers it.

The pain has been receding which, well, is good although only in the sense of he can start to think a little bit better and bad in the sense that he's pretty sure it's not because his injuries aren't actually that bad. It's tempting to stay here, in this bed of leaves and blood, but he

can't 'cause of the itch in his brain that won't go away.

Will , it says, you can't leave him. You promised .

And he did. Maybe not out loud, but he'd made a commitment. He'd looked at a scared boy and promised to get him out of here, to the family who loved him.

Maybe he shouldn't be taking it so seriously.

He's going to die here. That's not really in question anymore, is it? There's blood on the ground, covering his vision, in his mouth. He's more tired than he's ever been in his life. And even if it weren't for that, there may not even be a way home.

If only he had a pair of magic red shoes that he could use to send him back to Kansas.

The thing is, he was a scared little boy once. Sure, not in these circumstances because, what the hell, this is not a normal situation to be in. But neither was being twelve years old in a big scary house by himself with nothing but a hurriedly scribbled note from his parents telling him that they've gone away.

He's been sat out in the cold, shivering and hungry because he'd forgotten that when you leave the house you need to take your keys with you. Living in the posh end of town with no neighbours for miles had never felt so awful.

He's been promised stuff before, too.

("We'll be home for Christmas, bud, just you wait.")

"You can come with us next time – how about that?"

"If you get your grades up, I'll see about giving you your bike back.")

And he's been let down more times than he can count.

("He's not angry at you, sweetie, he'll be in a better mood tomorrow.")

“I’m sorry, son – it won’t happen again.”

“You work on your grades, alright, and I’ll work on my anger.”)

No kid deserves to feel like that. Cold, alone and scared. Learning that people are worse than they seem, promises are meant to be broken and if you want to survive in the world and make it through, you have to make it bend before you.

Steve had made a promise. He’s going to save Will or die trying. And for all the times that he felt like screaming and on one was listening, he’s going to try. For all the times that Will has made him laugh unexpectedly, or feel some hope, he’s going to try. And for all the times that he was dick, that he made fun of someone to make himself feel better, for all the times that he’s made someone cry, he’s going to try to make someone else’s life just a little better.

Moving his arm is harder than anything he’s done in his entire life. There’s no way that he’s going to be able to stand, so he does the closest thing to an army crawl that he can manage, feet scrabbling in the dirt, hands clawing his way forwards. One hand closes against something solid and when he cranes his neck to look, he sees the nail bat.

He almost cries.

The thing is, Steve was a bad person. He was.

Except, now he doesn’t want to be.

9. meet me on the battlefield

Summary for the Chapter:

The monster, the one that Nancy saw the other night when she stepped into the other world, emerges through the wall like a creature being birthed. It pushes through flesh-like membrane, first a skeletal arm, followed by a deformed foot and finally the grossly distorted petal mouth.

“Everybody back!”

Hopper advances, pistol raised and he fires one, two, three shots. The monster doesn’t even flinch.

Nancy looks at Barb, sees her pale, terrified face and turns to Jonathon instead. Her mind is working a mile a minute. The deer in the wood. Will falling off his bike. El’s nosebleeds. It’s drawn to blood and they’ve led it straight here.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm sorry it's taken so long for me to write this chapter! I ran out of any inspiration for a while, but I think I'm getting back into the swing of it now. I hope it's worth the wait and, as always, please come chat with me in the comments!

We carry on through the storm
Tired soldiers in this war
Remember what we're fighting for

Meet me on the battlefield / SVRCINA

The room is a bustle of activity and noise, the sound bouncing off the walls the way that seems universal in school gyms and nowhere else. Nancy stands by the far wall, pretending to read the names on the

trophies as she watches Hopper and Joyce converse, their voices low and quiet as they debate their plan of action.

Jonathon sits on the floor with his back against the wall, head between his knees. Over by the makeshift sensory deprivation pool, the kids have surrounded El. They are as loud and excitable as ever, barely phased by the show of power she had just showcased as if she hadn't just shaken everything that was known about science and physics and the fundamental truths of the world.

There is a girl who can make barriers between worlds, travel in her own mind and move things without touching them. Nancy wishes she could accept that as easily as her own brother.

Barb touches her shoulder.

"Hey."

Nancy gives her a small smile, goes back to fiddling with the hem of her skirt.

"How are you feeling?"

"I don't know." She sighs. "He's hurt, Barb, and it sounds bad. What if he doesn't make it?"

"Then it's not your fault." Barb looks at her appraisingly. "You've done everything you could. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't even know where Steve was."

Nancy swallows. There's a lump in her throat. "That's not true though," she says.

"Nance-"

"If I'd really cared about Steve then I would have gone to the police when Jonathon first showed me those pictures instead of going off into the woods. I heard him when I went through the gateway, Barb, he was right there. I could have-"

"There's no use in going over what-ifs."

Nancy looks over to Jonathon. He's sitting upright now, which is progress, but he looks wrecked. "Please don't hate me," she whispers.

Barb takes one of her hands and squeezes. "Never," she promises.

"I- I think I forgot about him. I've been so wrapped up in what happened, how it happened, getting to the bottom of the mystery that I lost sight of the fact that something was actually at stake."

"You were compartmentalising."

"No, that's not it... I think I genuinely forgot that Steve was in danger. And now he's injured and he might die, he might already be dead, and I don't even know him that well but no one else seems to care. Where are his parents? Where are Tommy and Carol?"

It's only saying it out loud that some of it begins to click in Nancy's head. Will has had people looking for him since the morning after he disappeared; it took an entire day for anyone to notice Steve had gone – and even then it was her. His best friends hadn't noticed and his parents weren't even picking up the phone.

There was something so terribly wrong about it all. She didn't even know what his favourite colour was, or where he wanted to go to college, and yet she was the only one who had cared enough to look.

She doesn't even realise that she's begun to hyperventilate until Barb grasps her shoulders. She bites her lip hard, using the pain to try and focus.

"It's okay, Nance," Barb says, looking her in the eye. "It's okay. Just – take a deep breath, we're going to get through this. Don't worry about the things that haven't happened yet, just worry about how we're going to get through right now. You can't change whatever has happened to Steve, or Will, or you and Jonathon. And you can't control whatever is happening in that other dimension. But what you can do is pull yourself together and work out how to help everyone right now."

Nancy swallows. There's an iron taste in her mouth. She must have broken skin.

Across the room, Hopper claps his hands sharply. The sound echoes across the gym and everyone snaps to attention, even Dustin who Nancy has known since he was about four years old and has never seen stand so still.

“Listen up,” Hopper says. “Here’s what’s going to happen. Joyce and I are going to the lab. We’re going to go through the gate and find Will and bring him home. The rest of you are to stay here and keep your heads down, you understand?”

Jonathon protests instantly. “I’m coming with you,” he says.

“No!” Joyce says sharply. “I need you here, looking after the others.”

“No way,” Mike argues. Nancy rolls her eyes at the petulance in his voice. “We don’t need a babysitter. We’re coming with you.”

“Yeah!” Lucas says.

“We’ve got one of the X Men on our side, with super awesome mind-bending powers-” Dustin sticks his hand in the air and mimes an explosion, “-that’s like bringing a tank to a war zone and then using a slingshot.”

“El is not a tank,” Mike says hotly, “she’s not a weapon, she’s a person.” He turns pleadingly to Hopper. “But she can help! You can’t just leave us here like- like we’re-”

“Like you’re kids? You’re staying here. You are not to follow us. You are not to move. You are not even to breathe; do you understand me?” Hopper says.

“What about us?” Nancy asks.

“Do I need to repeat myself?”

“For Steve,” Barb cuts in. “He doesn’t know either of you. One of us should go with you – someone he recognises.”

“Look, I understand that you want to help your friend,” Joyce says, stepping forwards with her hands spread placatingly, “but the lab and the people at the lab are dangerous. We can’t take El back there but

they already know me and Hop, there's a chance they'll let us through. We can't risk the rest of you getting hurt. Staying here is the best thing for everyone."

There's a moment of silence and then everyone starts yelling at once. El watches silently but the other three kids argue loudly and angrily, Jonathon trying to argue with his mum and Hopper's face goes red. Nancy is about to step in to join the fray when Barb tugs on her sleeve.

"What is it--"

She trails off as she sees Barb's face; her mouth falling open and her skin paling. She raises a shaking hand, pointing at the far wall. Nancy follows her gaze.

The plaster is cracking. Dark lines appear and spread like a spider crawling out a hole. It happens so quickly and silently that Nancy doesn't even have time to yell before a claw punches through the wall.

Barb screams.

The yelling stops as everyone turns to look-

The monster, the one that Nancy saw the other night when she stepped into the other world, emerges through the wall like a creature being birthed. It pushes through the flesh-like membrane, first a skeletal arm, followed by a deformed foot and finally the grossly distorted petal mouth.

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Nancy looks at Barb, sees her pale, terrified face and turns to Jonathon instead. Her mind is working a mile a minute. The deer in the wood. Will falling off his bike. El's nosebleeds. It's drawn to blood and they've led it straight here.

They need to do something, to fight. "The car," she says, tugging on

Jonathon's arm.

He understands instantly, turns to Joyce and says, "Keys."

She chucks them at him without barely a moment's hesitation and he snatches them in mid-air and runs. Lucas, Mike and Dustin have retreated into a corner and are brandishing the hose, a dumbbell and a chocolate pudding between them. El stands in front of them, one arm keeping them behind her and the other raised.

"That's the Demogorgon?" she hears Dustin whisper in awe.

The monster pulls itself free of the wall and straightens. It looks even worse under luminescent lighting than it did in the other world. Its pink fleshy skin looks like it's rotting, dark and disfigured. Slime drips off of its limbs. Nancy feels her legs shaking but is rooted to the spot. Distantly, she hears a car door slam.

Hopper fires off another shot and the monster turns its face towards him and screams.

Then, it freezes as if stuck in time, mouth flaps still open, one leg forwards, mid-stride. Mike whoops and Nancy realises that it's El's powers, her immense, crazy powers.

"I can't-" El says with effort, her muscles straining. "Too strong."

Jonathon bursts back through the gym doors, the box that had got them in trouble in the first place in his hands. He lets it fall to the floor and kicks it towards Nancy. She crouches and pulls out the pistol, fingers scrambling for the bullets so she can load it.

"Nancy, is that a gun?" Mike asks.

"Joyce," Barb says urgently. "That's a gate."

She points at the monster. Behind it, the hole that it crawled through is still there. Slime oozes down the wall.

Nancy pulls out the rifle and hands it to Barb. It seems insane to think that it was only a couple of days ago that she was using it to shoot tin cans behinds Jonathon's house.

El starts to scream, first low and gaining in pitch and volume. Blood is pooling on her upper lip and dripping onto her chin. The lights start to flash and slowly, ever so slowly, the monster begins to move again, as if wading through deep water.

Joyce looks towards the membrane behind it, the hole that it had carved and then stepped through, and her mouth falls open. “Hop-“

Jonathon hefts the nail bat. He looks to Nancy and then to Barb and they share a decision.

Nancy raises the gun, cocks it and aims. Jonathon joins her side, Barb on the other, both with weapons raised.

“We’ve got this,” Barb says.

“Mum, save Will,” Jonathon says.

“Go!” Nancy yells. “If you don’t come back, we’ll meet you at the lab.”

Hopper fires off one more shot, then runs for the hole, Joyce on his heels. Nancy fires, aims, fires again. It’s about as useful as Hopper’s pistol, which means not very, but it stumbles slightly.

Joyce dives through the hole headfirst and disappears. Hopper hesitates for a moment, looks back at them and then follows.

El yells.

The monster charges.

...

Steve breathes.

The air hurts his throat. Spit dribbles from the corner of his mouth. Leaves stick to his face.

He reaches one arm forward, the other holding his stomach, and scrabbles with his feet. He slides along the ground, two inches, maybe three.

He screams.

Time has lost all meaning. All he knows is that he needs to find Will, to save him, and that to do that, he needs to keep moving. So he crawls, he screams, he keeps going.

Panting, he rests his head on the ground for a moment. The world keeps spinning around him and he's not entirely sure if it's the ground that keeps swaying or him.

Get it together, he tells himself. Don't stop. You can't stop.

He lifts his head, reaches his arm forward one more time - and then stops. He doesn't know he didn't see before, but there's a body in front of him, lying curled up on the ground about ten feet away.

"Will?" he rasps.

The figure moves, then rolls over. "Steve," Will whimpers. His face is streaked with dirt but he looks unhurt.

He doesn't know how it's possible.

"It left me," Will says as if reading his mind. "I don't - it just dropped me and ran. I don't know where it went."

Steve wants to cry with relief. He pushes forward with his feet, trying to get closer. He groans, too low and guttural to be a scream.

"You're hurt."

"I'm fine." Steve glances back up. Will has moved closer. He's kneeling in front of him, arm outstretched as if to touch him but unsure as to whether he should.

Steve didn't hear him move but to be fair, he can't hear much over the thundering sound of blood rushing in his ears.

“You’re - you’re dying.”

“Maybe.”

Steve pushes himself upright. He does scream this time. There’s a tree next to him that he hadn’t noticed before, too busy focusing on just moving forwards. He falls against it, grateful that it stops him from falling straight back to the ground.

Will watches him, tears in his eyes.

“Listen, kid,” Steve says with great effort. “Listen to me.”

“You shouldn’t talk,” Will says. “We should stop the bleeding. We practised bandages at school, I can-“

“You’re gonna survive.” Steve wishes that he had the energy to move. Whatever reserves he’d had left had disappeared the moment he saw Will alive and unhurt. He wants to pat Will’s shoulder, or hug him, or force him to run.

He can’t.

“I fucked up but you can, you can still make it. You’ve got...” Steve runs out of air and has to pause to regain his breath, “a good family. They’re coming for you.”

“Don’t die.” Will wipes tears away from his cheeks roughly, smearing dirt. “You said you’d help me.”

“Sorry, Byers. Sometimes... people break promises. They lie because they’re bad people and... fuck ups. But you’re- you’re good. Not like...”

He trails off. He can’t remember the end of the sentence. Can’t remember what he’d been trying to say.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

One. Two. Three.

Breathe through the pain. Just keep going.

Maybe he passes out again. Maybe he doesn't. All he knows is that when he opens his eyes again, he's colder than he was before and he's alone.

Will is gone. And really, Steve thinks hysterically, knowing it's true, it doesn't matter.

Because he'd never been there at all.

...

Nothing could have prepared Hopper for what he finds on the other side of the gate.

The air tastes like mould, sounds are muted and distorted and everything seems like a twisted version of itself. He doesn't have time to stop and wonder though because Joyce is already marching forwards, fearless even in the face of whatever this is.

"I know where he is," she says as they wind their way through dark halls and finally, into the outdoors. "What El described - it's the library."

"How can you be sure?" Hopper asks.

Something howls in the distance. He puts one hand on the pistol on his belt.

"I just know," Joyce snaps. Then, "She said there were books, that there were shelves of books. It's the most obvious place."

Hopper's not sure that anything is obvious when they're talking about monsters and alternate dimensions, but he trusts Joyce's gut. She's been right this entire time - and maybe if he'd trusted her sooner, then Will and Steve would already be safe.

They trek towards the library, keeping an eye out for any creatures that might be stalking them.

He doesn't say it, but he knows Joyce is thinking it. Unless they're very lucky and the demo-whatsit was created by the lab somehow, then where one monster exists, there are probably a whole load more somewhere.

They need to move quickly.

When they finally reach the library, it's immediately obvious they've found the right place.

There are even more vines here and the stench is much worse. Hopper knows that smell of rotting flesh and it's here now. He waves Joyce behind him with one arm and enters first, pistol raised and at the ready.

The first body is barely recognisable as human.

It's spread-eagled on the floor, vacant eyes staring up at the ceiling. Its stomach is ripped open and where its guts should be, there's an empty cavity.

Joyce gags.

"Two hunters went missing," Hopper says as he edges past. "We thought it was a bear."

Further in, there's another body. This one is identifiable as male but it's not in much better condition than the first.

"Should we... should we try to bring them back?" Joyce whispers.

They deserve proper burials, he knows. A chance for someone to know what happened to them, for closure for their families. He shakes his head anyway. "We can't carry them," he says. "We need to focus on the living."

If they're still alive, that is.

They turn a corner into the main reading room and Hopper stops. He's not prepared for this.

There are more bodies. They decorate the floor, the shelves, the

tables. Some are bloated and rotten, disfigured like the ones they found before. Others are recent, their faces still etched with horror and fear. Intermixed are the bodies of other things, animals that Hopper can't even begin to identify, that he's fairly sure don't exist in their own dimension.

How long has this been happening, he wonders with horror. There are people in uniforms - probably from the lab - but there are others, too, that he knows should have been reported missing.

Are they from nearby towns? Or are they just people that no one had cared enough to search for?

"Oh my god," Joyce whispers.

She shines her torch around the room - thank God she was already holding it when they needed to run - and illuminates the destruction. As she passes over the thriller section, Hopper grabs her arm.

"There," he says.

It's Will.

He's pinned to a set of shelves, there's some kind of vine or tentacle in his mouth and he should be impossible to recognise at this distance, but Hopper's been staring at his pictures of him for the last week. It's him.

Joyce runs and Hopper follows.

He's pale and clammy. Hopper pulls the vine - tentacle - thing - from his throat and Sarah's face is in his mind the whole time, the tubes and the hospital and he can't breathe because he won't let this happen again, he's not going to watch another child die.

It's hard enough to bring air into his own lungs but he acts without thought, training kicking in as he kneels, tilts Will's head back and pushes air into his lungs.

Sarah's gasping breaths are in his mind and Joyce's sobs in his ear.

Will breathes.

Hopper stumbles backwards, one hand on his face. Joyce kneels down next to her son and pulls him close, rocking him back and forth.

He's still breathing.

"Will," Joyce says, "I'm here, baby, you're safe now, I'm here."

She's so strong. Hopper knows this, has always known this, but it still surprises him. He wishes he had her strength; life has broken him far more easily than this.

"We should go," he says.

Joyce clutches Will to her body more tightly but nods.

He keeps her gaze for a moment longer, to make sure that she's sure, but she doesn't waver.

"I'm ready," she says and stands, Will still in her arms. His head rolls to the side, into her shoulder and Hopper sees the way her breath catches.

"We can take him back," Hopper says. "Then come back for Steve."

"No." Joyce shakes her head. "We came here for two boys. He protected my son when I couldn't. I won't leave him."

She's resolute. Hopper can't stop a slow smile spreading across his face, no matter how inappropriate it is.

"Alright then," he agrees.

Hold on, Steve, he thinks. We're coming for you.